

'The kingdom: God in charge'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life. – Rom.8,10

Collect:

Almighty God, without you we are not able to please you. Mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

The kingdom of God
is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores
what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory
in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter
the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace,
the captives are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

The kingdom of God
is challenge and choice,
believe the good news,
repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
brought Christ to His cross,
our crisis of judgment
for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come,
the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun,
in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom
shall answer his call,
and all things cry, 'Glory!'
to God all-in-all.

Bryn Rees (1911 -83)

Mk.4,26-34

Dear friends

In these parables before us Jesus teaches vital truths regarding the kingdom of God. It is the central theme of Jesus' ministry and the point of all he says and does. Which ought to make it clear to us that faith, which is the other great theme and corresponds to it, must be understood to be the way in which the kingdom of God operates and in which it is present.

How might we "translate" the expression 'kingdom of God' so as to bring out that it is ordered to faith and faith is ordered to it? One thing to help us here is to pose ourselves the question: "How does God come to be in charge – truly in charge - over my life, over his people? How does a new principle come to be at work in me, in his people, which results in obedience to his (the King's) will?" For the words '*kingdom of God*' suggest a state of affairs where God is in charge and his will is obeyed. And the place of this and the manner of it is *faith*. It is the faithful alone who can truly answer the question "Who is in charge here?" with the words: "God is!"

So Jesus' parables here are about the all-important matter of how God comes to be truly in charge and savingly at work. In view here is not God's governance over his creation, his sovereign control over all. In this respect there is no question of his being in charge. Nor is in view some form of political realisation of God's rule through human institutions.

What is in view is the heart of man, our heart, and the question what has charge over it and what is at work in it. That such is in view comes out clearly in Jesus' words: "*The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst (within you).*" (Lk.17,21) Or in what Paul says to the church in Rome: "*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*" (Rom.14,17

What is envisaged when Jesus teaches the kingdom of God is (that there be) a people who do what Satan tried to tempt Jesus away from and what Jesus put to him in response: "*Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only*"; a people who are done – because they are set free from it – with being captive to the suggestive ways of sin and to the fear of death and to the drive of evil desires; a people whose ruling principle in the heart is love of God and of one's neighbour; and a people who because such a new principles is at work in them have a sure stake in the coming world of God, will

inherit the kingdom of God.

You have, perhaps, like me made the frustrating experience of waiting for a bus to take you home or to wherever your destination lay, only to find that when it finally came it drove straight past you, because it was, as the sign read, "Out of service". According to the biblical account so is the heart of man – it is "out of service" in regard to God. It runs for itself and where it wills, not heeding the destination for which it was made, going after all manner of idols as it serves created things rather than the Creator (Rom.1,25), and is lost to God's will, purpose and destination – serving love in unblemished righteousness and godliness.

What features in the kingdom parables as the ripe corn growing from the scattered seed and *"the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade"* growing from the mustard seed *"which is the smallest of all seeds on earth"*, stands for the good works that proceed from the heart which is "in service", from the heart, to use an earlier way of describing it, of which God has come to be truly in charge and in which a new God-born principle is at work. It also stands for the end that such engagement in good works leads to – resurrection and the coming of *'the new heaven and new earth'* (for instance Rev.21,1) of God's promise.

But now, dear friends, it is the burden of these parables, really, to say something about how God comes to be in charge and the heart to be "in service". Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a process, to something that is operative, powerful and active. And the point of the first parable is the hiddenness of it. *"He knows not how"* the seed comes to be a fruit-bearing thing. God comes to be in charge we know not how – that is, our knowing and knowledge doesn't do it, we don't do it. Were we to think that it is down to us and the result of our works and our worrying and were we to teach that way, we would join those to whom Jesus says: *"You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."* (Mt.23,13) God comes to be in charge in a hidden way. Yet this does not mean that he does so without means. The means are his word and prayer. Paul puts it well in his letter to the Corinthians: *"What, after all, are we? Only servants through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."* (1Cor.3,5.6)

The planting and watering refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ through the word of God, preached and taught and heard with prayer. And so God is at work in a hidden way through the word that proclaims Jesus Christ as the Saviour who redeems us from the powers of sin and death and who brings the Spirit of God who dwells in us.

Dear friends, let not the seeming smallness and weakness of God's word, by which faith lives, deceive you into thinking that God's kingdom comes and grows in ways other than through Christ by the Spirit, or that God does not come to take charge and instil a new principle in the heart that honours his word. Yes, let us put our hope and confidence in God's word. For where Christ is, there God is at work, to heal, redeem and save – to make and complete his new creation which says rejoicingly "in service".

AMEN

Lord God, to whom belongs the kingdom and the power and the glory, whose throne is firmly established in heaven and is founded on righteousness and justice – to you be all glory. Not through coercive measures do you set us free that we may serve you, but in mercy through judgment and grace through Jesus Christ. And in him through faith we are heirs with him of your kingdom. Grant us by your Holy Spirit in repentance and faith to make use of your word by which these things are held out to us and does your work within us, so that the good works that you have prepared for us to do may issue from our heart to the praise and glory of your name. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [we give thanks for God’s mercy and faithfulness, for the compassion and steadfast love he has for all that he has made, that all his judgments are just and righteous, that he is our refuge and the helper of all who call to him; we pray for those who have become ill, are fighting illness or are recovering from it, for those who care for the needs of others; for those in positions of leadership and authority: that they may rule wisely and seek peace, that they may guard the values by which a society can flourish, that they may lead with courage and wisdom, for a turning to the light that is God’s Word; for those who have lost loved ones, need comfort into their grieving and the loving presence of friends; we give thanks for all the help we have received and still experience, for grace and answered prayers; we pray for the despondent and the hopeless, for those who seek light, for the wisdom to comfort the suffering; we pray for our sister church in Northern India and for the body of Christ worldwide and here, for our church, the church’s leadership; we think of the situation in India, Nepal and other places, the suffering of the people there and elsewhere, the attempt of the authorities to regain control; we give thanks for the help that is being delivered; we pray for the situation in Israel, the rift between the Palestinians and the Jews; for perseverance in the determination to share our means with those who lack them; we pray for God’s blessing on the preaching and teaching of His word, for people to respond in repentance and faith, for freedom and liberty and courage to stand for what is good and true and honours His name;]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now to him who loved us, gave us every pledge that love could give, freely shed his blood to save us, gave his life that we might live, be the kingdom, power and glory and thanksgiving evermore.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN