

Further Thoughts on the Kingdom of God  
Using our resources to Display God's Kingdom

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Bible readings: Matthew 22:15-22. Malachi 3:6-12

We are continuing our sermon series on the Kingdom of God. Or the Kingdom of Heaven, the terms are interchangeable. But both refer to a place where God reigns supreme and every aspect of life comes under His Lordship. It's a real place, but to us unseen. So amazing beyond our imagining that we can't find words, but every now and again we recognise a glimpse of heaven(or the kingdom) to enable us to hang on to our belief that it is there.

Last week Terry asked us how we respond to God's invitation to the wedding banquet of his son, a metaphor for heaven. In each talk we are trying to glimpse a bit more of the mystery of the Kingdom and see if we can apply any of its values to our own lives. From our bible readings today we are thinking about how to give back to God what is God's. This includes more than money. Does our use of our resources display the values of God's Kingdom? I want to give a bit of background first.

The majority of Jesus teaching concerns the Kingdom of God. We could say that when Jesus took on human flesh and lived with us for 33 years he was the embodiment of the Kingdom. Jesus lived the kingdom, was the kingdom, talked about the kingdom and demonstrated the kingdom in all he did. He didn't take it away when he ascended to heaven after the resurrection, by leaving the Holy Spirit we can have access to the Kingdom now. But like all the things of God we are dealing with mystery. As with knowing God himself there are times when we get a clear glimpse and times when we are full of doubts and feel our faith is weak and we can only just hang on. One thing of which we can be certain is that there is always more of God to know than we know now.

A verse in Romans says "the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy". To me this means when we are experiencing more peace and joy in our lives we are getting closer to the Kingdom. I will never forget the joy I saw in Stephanie when God healed her back at New Wine. All supernatural healings in Jesus' name are occasions when the kingdom breaks through into our world. As we know God has designed us to live in relationship with him. He wants us to participate in his work and that main work is extending his kingdom here on earth. Supposing Stephanie hadn't been willing to cooperate with God that day. Supposing she didn't stand when the speaker pointed her out, or if she had refused to be prayed for. She would have missed out on something amazing and the kingdom of heaven would not have been revealed in her life that day. If you ask Stephanie about that experience she will tell you what an amazing experience of God's blessing it was to her and when she feels low she remembers it and reminds herself of God's goodness to her. Stephanie was obedient to God that day. She stepped into His will and the Kingdom of God was extended.

Any time God is working through a Christian's life the kingdom of God is here. But we only have a look around us to realise that the Kingdom of God is far from fully here yet. The Church's job, Jon's job, in fact for all of us, our role is to allow God to work through us so the Kingdom of God can be extended. This is a huge challenge but ultimately it's the most rewarding one we could imagine.

Our gospel reading this morning is also challenging. Have you ever noticed in all these encounters with Jesus recorded in the gospels no one ever walks away saying "that was nice". They are either amazed and are attracted to Jesus or they are shocked and have a negative reaction. Jesus polarises. So don't worry if you ever find you have strong feelings when you hear about Jesus. I think it's what He intends. We probably need to be more concerned if we don't feel anything. If you remember on Jon's first Sunday here he said it was ok to disagree with him. Well I'd like to say it's ok to disagree with me, but if you do, please go and talk to Jon about it!

In 1st century Jerusalem, when Jesus was preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, the nation was under Roman occupation. To the Romans Caesar was King, the emperor. Rome demanded taxes from all its territories. They introduced Roman coinage that were imprinted with caesar's image and the words "Son of God." What an insult! Not only to Jesus, who is the true King but also to all the Jews who believed in the God of Abraham and Jacob. How the Jews hated having to pay taxes to the nation that had stolen their land. But any revolutions, and there had been some when Jesus was growing up in Nazareth, were mercilessly crushed by the Romans and the rebels crucified.

In our reading the Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus, they want to get evidence to have him arrested. They thought "as he preaches God as King so he'll tell us not to pay tax to the emperor and then we'll have him." Notice how they butter Jesus up first!

Jesus knows their evil intent, calls them "Hypocrites" and gives them an answer that surprises them. Asking for a coin that was used to pay the tax, asking who's image is on it? "The emperor's" they reply. Jesus says "Well, Give to The emperor the things that are The emperor's and give to God the things that are God's". V22 says the Pharisees were amazed at Jesus reply and walked away.

Giving back to God what is God's is one of the key values of the kingdom. If we can do that everything else will fall into place.

Other versions of the bible say instead of "give back to the emperor,... Give back to God..." "pay to Caesar what is Caesars and pay to God what is God's". I think what Jesus is referring to here is spoken of in our OT reading. The Jews instantly knew what paying back to God what is God's meant. They were very familiar with the tithe, it was part of the law they followed, returning to God 1/10th of their income in money or kind. If they did God promised to bless them.

Money and the church - too big an issue for today! In some countries the State pays towards the church. We have an odd mix in the Uk. Although the Queen is head of the Church of England the state pay nothing towards the church. The only money the church has is given by the parishioners.

When I first started coming to this church in the early 1980's I had no idea about any of this. I remember being shocked when a couple of people from the stewardship committee asked to come to see me after I'd been coming to church for about 6months. They asked if I would join the envelope scheme committing to pay the same amount of money to the

church every week. I told them that I saw coming to church like going to the cinema, I only paid on the occasions I went. Well they didn't seem to hear me because when I next turned up at church I was presented with a box of printed envelopes with my name on them. I can tell you I was very cross. (What was I saying about strong feelings). The next week I phoned the vicar, David Pryce, to complain. He calmly asked if he could come to see me and as a result of that conversation invited me to join the small group of adult ladies for coffee every Thursday morning at the vicarage to discuss the Christian Faith. Roz was part of that group and that was the beginning of our life long friendship. We were confirmed the next Spring.

Attitudes to money can tell us a lot about how much we trust God. As my faith grew I was happy to contribute to the running of the church. It was recognising His love for me and His huge generosity that caused me to want to give back to God. But it's an ongoing journey. I'm working at seeing God as my total security, strength, and provider, trying not to worry about my future, believing "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". Ps 23:1

I recently heard a talk on our gospel reading where the speaker said we should view paying 10% of our income to the Church as our rental payment to God for our place on this planet. Is that "Paying to God what's God's?". It makes sense if we believe He is the creator of all and gives us everything we have including the gift of life.

There are certain values of the Kingdom that also apply naturally. An example is "as you sow you reap". No matter how good the weather is or how fertile the soil is we won't grow any fruit unless we plant some seed. If we want the good things in life, blessings from God, we have to ask ourselves are we sowing seed? Kingdom seed of love, kindness, generosity, hope, prayer. The more we sow into the Kingdom the more peace and joy we will experience in our lives.

Right now, as Christians, it's as if we have dual citizenship. As citizens of the United Kingdom we are required to pay tax for the services we receive from the state. We get into trouble if we don't. What are we required to do as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven? How can we give back to God? Can we use a portion of the resources God has blessed us with to show our community what a good Father God is? If we can we will extend the Kingdom here in Sunningdale.

As we grow in love and recognise God's goodness to us we will want to give back to God what is God's, then everything else will fall into place.

Amen.