

The Kingdom of God and the Ministry of Jesus

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Scripture Reading: Mark 1:1-15

Introduction

The first time I seriously studied the Gospels was as a university student back in the 1960s. I was at Sydney University which had the great benefit of being next door to Moore Theological College. I was a member of the large Evangelical Union. It had Bible study groups all over campus and they included students from every faculty in the university. Our Bible study notes were often prepared by Moore College lecturers. So as unsuspecting university students we were getting a theological education without being aware of it. For three of my four years at Sydney University I was a Bible study leader. Looking back I thank God for those very formative years of my life.

There's one thing I'll never forget from my initial study of the Gospels. It was the opening line to the study notes: "As Evangelical Christians we know what to do with Paul, but we don't know what to do with the Gospels." My guess would be that if many of us were to check our files we would have more sermons on the Epistles than we do on the Gospels. But why is this? Why do we find it easier to preach on Paul than we do on the Gospels?

When I later became a full-time theology student, I was told it was because we stand on the same side of the cross and the resurrection as Paul. We share his perspective. We are at the same place in redemptive history. My lecturer went even further and was bold enough to advise that our preaching should mainly come from the Epistles for that reason. It's easier to preach from the Epistles because they interpret the major events of redemption, and we should do the same in our preaching. So we focus on Paul rather than on the Gospels because it's easier. Some would even say that's how it should be. We can identify with Paul. We share his perspective. So it's easier to preach from him.

Yet I have a hunch there's more to it than that. In our theological tradition we have worked more with Paul than with the Gospels. After all the

Reformation was essentially a rediscovery of Paul. He had been practically ignored for more than a thousand years. So the Reformers were excited about Paul, and their spiritual descendants have shared that excitement ever since. The result has been that we have a far better developed theology of Paul than we have of the Gospels. So at bottom it is a question of theology. Our theology of the Gospels needs to be as well developed as our theology of Paul.

When it comes to a theology of the Gospels, the centerpiece of that theology (at least in the case of the first three Gospels) will be the kingdom of God. We will know what to do with the Gospels when we understand the kingdom of God. We will understand Jesus' ministry because it was all about the kingdom of God. We will understand Jesus' preaching because it too was all about the kingdom of God. These are big claims, and I admit that the scope of my lecture is very ambitious. The longer I study the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – the more I am convinced that this is the crux of it. The heart of these Gospels, the central theme of these Gospels, is the kingdom of God. That's where we need to begin.

Today I want to begin at the very beginning. I don't want to begin with a definition. I don't want to introduce you to the modern debate about the kingdom, fascinating though it is. I want to start where the Gospels begin. I want to start with what is generally assumed to be the earliest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark. Again it is generally assumed that Matthew and Luke knew and used Mark. Recently, convincing arguments have been advanced that John was also aware of Mark and may even have assumed that his readers were familiar with Mark as well.⁶⁴ Be that as it may, there are good reasons for thinking that Mark was the first Gospel. So that's a logical place to start. Now what was the first thing Jesus said in this first Gospel. What was Jesus' opening line to his preaching ministry? How did he introduce his message?

The answer is in Mark 1:14-15:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (NIV)

⁶⁴ See Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 147-71.

That's the note on which Jesus' public ministry opened: "The time has come" (or more literally: "The time is fulfilled"), "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Gospel."

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' preaching started on much the same note: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17).

This lays the groundwork for everything else that Jesus does in his public ministry: "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is near." This is foundational. These are the first words of Jesus in the earliest written Gospel. This is the basis for everything else. This is the cornerstone for the grand edifice that is the ministry of Jesus – his teaching, his preaching, his miracles, his death and resurrection. Everything, literally everything, has to be understood in the light of this opening statement. You'll appreciate from your knowledge of ancient architecture that if the cornerstone is not positioned exactly, then the whole building will be out of line. If we don't understand this foundational statement, then everything else in Jesus' ministry will be out of alignment. Misunderstand him here and your understanding of everything else will be skewed. Understand him here and you will have a wonderful perspective on everything that follows. Very few words of Jesus, very few words in the Gospels, are as pivotal and as important as these: "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel."

A. The Time is Fulfilled

If it is so important to get this exactly right, what precisely does Jesus mean with the words "the time is fulfilled"? It is a huge statement, but essentially what he means is this: "The great prophetic future predicted in the OT is now here. What the prophets prophesied has now arrived. What the seers dreamed of has become reality. What the patriarchs longed for – it's now happening before your eyes. The great hope of Israel has finally come."

Now why can Jesus say this? What does he base it on? How can he make such a grand and lofty claim? How does he know that the time of God's great future has dawned? What makes him think that God has now moved world history from the age of promise to the age of fulfillment? The context makes this abundantly clear. There are three key events that form the background to Jesus' statement: (a) the ministry of John the Baptist, (b) the baptism of Jesus, and (c) the temptation of Jesus.

So let's first examine the background to Jesus' statement. Verse 15 becomes so much clearer in the light of its preceding context, namely the first fourteen verses of Mark. These verses are saturated with OT quotations and allusions. These opening paragraphs of Mark's Gospel are steeped in the language of the OT.

1. The Ministry of John the Baptist

An examination of the introduction to Mark's Gospel reveals that there are at least three ways in which John the Baptist fulfills Scripture:

- (a) He was "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Verse 3 is a direct quote from Is. 40:3.
- (b) He was also the one promised by God in Mal 3:1, "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way". Later in Malachi we read that this messenger will come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Mal 4:5; cf. Luke 1:17). This thought is picked up in Luke, but it is already hinted at in Mark.
- (c) Notice John's strange clothing in vs. 6: "John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist." If you know your OT, you won't think this to be completely strange. Who else was dressed in a similar way? In 2 Kings 1:8, this is how some people described Elijah: "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt round his waist."

So that's how Mark portrays John. He was Malachi's messenger. He was Isaiah's voice in the wilderness. He was the Elijah who was to come. In point after point, in detail after detail, he was fulfilling the OT. You will notice, however, that by the time Jesus makes his opening declaration, John's ministry is as good as over. Consider the verse that precedes Jesus' grand opening statement: "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." (v. 14) That's an important perspective. John was the forerunner. He still belonged to the age of anticipation. Jesus introduces the age of fulfillment. Even though he was prophesied by the OT prophets, John is also the last of the OT prophets. In him an entire era draws to a close. The age of promise is over and the age of fulfillment has begun.

Not only was John the last of the prophets, he was also the greatest of the prophets. He had the unspeakable privilege of directly introducing Jesus to

the people. What the earlier prophets could only foretell from afar, John could do directly. What they could do only from a distance, John could do face to face. He is humbly aware of the immense privilege that has been bestowed on him: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (vv. 7-8). John still belongs to the age of promise – he baptizes with water. Jesus belongs to the age fulfillment – he baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus can baptize with the Holy Spirit, however, he must first himself be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

2. *Jesus' Baptism*

This brings us to the second major event that so clearly fulfils the OT and that is the baptism of Jesus. All the work of the OT prophets culminated and climaxed so brilliantly in the ministry of John. With the baptism of Jesus we encounter something entirely new.

Notice first of all the language of verse 10: "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." Isn't that unusual? In Matthew and Luke it simply says that "heaven was opened." Only Mark says that Jesus saw "heaven being torn open." Why does he put it that way? Again he seems to be echoing the language of the OT. Now at last the prayer of Isaiah the prophet is being answered: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!" (64:1). Now the heavens have been torn open and the Holy Spirit has come down. But there is more!

We move on to verse 11: "And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'." This is an extremely loaded statement and programmatic for Jesus' entire ministry. This sets the stage for everything that follows.

Very emphatically the heavenly voice declares: "You are my Son." Again we need to read this statement in the light of the OT. Who was the son of God in the OT? There is more than one candidate for the title. In Exod 4:22-23 God says to Pharaoh: "Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.'" So Israel is the son of God. This is confirmed again later in Hosea 11:1 where God recalls at a much later date: "Out of Egypt have I called my son."⁶⁵ But not only is Israel the son of God

⁶⁵ Cf. Isa 63:16; Jer 31:20.

in the OT. As the representative and as the embodiment of the nation, the king of Israel is also the son of God. This is what God said about King David in Psalm 89: “I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth” (v. 27). This is also reflected in the promise that God made to David about Solomon, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sam 7:14). The OT comes closest to the words at Jesus’ baptism in Psalm 2. There we have the enthronement Psalm for a Davidic king. It is when that king is enthroned that God decrees: “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (v. 7). This declaration is fulfilled directly in Jesus. He is great David’s greater Son. He is the king of Israel par excellence. Anointed with the Holy Spirit he is now the ideal king of Israel. All the earlier kings of Israel find their fulfillment in him.

Not only is Jesus God’s Son in some royal, official sense. There is more: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” In Psalm 2 the wording had been rather different: “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” So the heavenly voice is not quoting the Psalm exactly. So where does the rest of the declaration come from? At the beginning of Isaiah 42 we have the first Servant Song, and there the Servant of the Lord is introduced with these words: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.” There are some pertinent parallels between this pronouncement and the declaration at Jesus’ baptism. God delights in his Servant; God is well pleased with his Son. God puts his Spirit on his Servant; the Holy Spirit descends on his Son. God has chosen his Servant and he loves his Son. It seems all so similar. Could the Son and the Servant be the same person? All you have to do is read on. In Isaiah the Servant of the Lord becomes the suffering Servant of chapter 53. Mark will devote more of his Gospel to the Passion of Christ than any other. The beloved Son and the Servant of the Lord turn out to be one and the same.

So the statement from heaven almost buckles under the weight of meaning that every part carries: “You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.” What a totally loaded statement this is! Jesus is the King of Israel. Jesus is also the Servant of the Lord. Yes, he is a king, but he is a special kind of king. He is the Servant-King. As such, he “did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He took “the very nature of a servant ... and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:7-8). As the King of Psalm 2 he will rule the nations with a rod of iron (vv. 7-8). As Isaiah’s Servant, the Lord will lay on him the iniquity of us all (53:6).

3. *The Temptation of Jesus*

In Mark 1:12-13 we have the briefest possible account of the temptation:

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Jesus has just been proclaimed king; he has just been anointed to royal office. He has been anointed not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit. He seems to be greatly privileged and empowered. Yet now a strange thing happens. The Spirit drives him out into the desert. Note the combination here of desert, forty days, wild animals and angels. If our ears are attuned to the OT, we will pick up some clear associations. The reference to the forty days recalls Moses' stay on Mount Sinai and Elijah's wandering through the wilderness to Mount Horeb.⁶⁶ The wild animals suggest danger. Only frightening and unwanted animals live in the desert. Mark also refers to the ministering angels. The closest parallel is in the experience of Elijah. An angel supplied nourishment for him in the barren wilderness (1 Kings 19:5-7). So that's the basic story. Matthew and Luke take it up and develop it in different ways.

In Matthew 4:1-11 the OT background is very much in the desert wanderings of the children of Israel.⁶⁷ Israel was God's son who had gone out into the desert. There Israel had experienced trials and temptations, but it had succumbed. It had failed the test. Matthew portrays Jesus' temptations in such a way that where Israel failed Jesus triumphs. Where Israel fails in its role as God's son, Jesus succeeds.

In Luke 4:1-13 other factors seem to be at work. As the son of God Jesus is now not the counterpart of Israel, but of Adam. The first Adam and the last Adam were both tempted. The first Adam was tempted in Paradise, the last Adam in the wilderness. The first Adam was well fed and satisfied, the last

⁶⁶ Thus William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 60.

⁶⁷ In his person Jesus is seen as recapitulating the earlier history of Israel. Thus for Matthew Jesus' sojourn in Egypt repeats the earlier experience of the nation. Having identified both Israel and Jesus as the Son of God, he is justified in viewing Jesus' experience as a fulfillment of Hos 11:1: "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'" (2:15)

Adam had been fasting for forty days. The first Adam had company, the last Adam was alone. The first Adam fell, the last Adam stood. So the contrast drawn in Luke is not between Jesus and Israel, but between Jesus and Adam. Just prior to Luke's temptation account Adam has been referred to as the son of God (Luke 3:37). So Matthew and Luke are complementary. Jesus is not only the antitype of Israel, but of Adam as well.

No matter which way you look at it, whether from Matthew's perspective or from Luke's, Satan's ploy with both temptations is exactly the same. In two out of the three cases his opening line is: "If you are the Son of God ...". Satan is trying to break the allegiance between the Father and the Son. In a sense that should not be too difficult. The Father's way was a hard way. It was the way of sacrifice and service. Surely there was a way to kingship that did not involve sacrifice and service! Satan is offering Jesus a shortcut. He can have his kingdom without all the suffering and pain. He would give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, if Jesus would simply bow down and worship him. If Jesus had done that, Satan would have broken the allegiance between the Father and the Son. Jesus would have broken faith with the Father. Jesus would have broken his covenant with the Father.

It had all happened before. In Paradise Adam, the son of God, had broken the covenant of creation. In the wilderness Israel, the son of God, had broken the covenant made at Sinai. By the time of the Babylonian captivity the kings of Judah, who were the sons of God, had broken the covenant made with David. So Satan was up to his old tricks. It had worked every other time. Every son of God had broken the covenant with God. Adam had done it. Israel had done it. The Davidic kings had done it. They had all broken their covenant with God. Satan had succeeded every other time, but now he has more than met his match. This lonely famished man in the desert will overcome where all the others had failed. Where they fell, he will stand. Where they had broken the covenant, he will keep it. Every time Jesus counters Satan, he quotes from that great Book of the Covenant, the book of Deuteronomy. Not only is Deuteronomy the Book of the Covenant, in chapter 17 it also says that the king is to read this book "all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law" (v. 19). So when he quotes Deuteronomy again and again Jesus is acting in royal fashion. He is citing the king's book! No wonder he was so successful against Satan. He has endured the first test of his kingship! He is the royal Son who will never break the covenant with his Father.

So why did the Spirit drive Jesus into the desert? Why those forty days in the wilderness? It was so that Jesus could achieve a significant kingdom victory. Again there are parallels with the OT. In Matthew 3 and in Luke 3 Jesus is baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 4 and Luke 4 Jesus overcomes Satan in the desert. We detect a similar pattern with the first two kings of Israel. In 1 Samuel 10 Saul is anointed king. In 1 Samuel 11 he defeats the Ammonites at Jabesh Gilead. In 1 Samuel 16 David is anointed king. In 1 Samuel 17 he kills Goliath. Jesus repeats the pattern. First he is anointed King, then he achieves a significant kingdom victory.

No wonder Jesus can open his public ministry with an astounding declaration: “The time is fulfilled!” Some remarkable fulfillments have just taken place:

John the Baptist is “the voice crying in the wilderness” prophesied by Isaiah. He is Malachi’s messenger of the Lord and he is the Elijah who was to come.

With Jesus’ baptism the heavens are torn open and the Holy Spirit comes down in answer to Isaiah’s prayer. Jesus is declared to be the Son of God in the double sense of the promised Davidic King and the Servant of the Lord.

At his temptation Jesus proves that he is the genuine article, the true Son of God, who will never break the covenant with his Father. He is the last Adam, the faithful Israel, and also the rightful King of Israel.

So again is it any wonder that he can say, “The time is fulfilled”? John the Baptist has done his work. Jesus has been baptized and withstood the temptations of Satan. So now at last a new age has dawned. Finally God’s OT promises are being fulfilled. Now comes the big surprise, the greatest puzzle of this verse. First Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled.” Then he says, “The kingdom of God is near.” After all the fulfillments we have just witnessed that is not what we would have expected. We would have expected a simple equation: The King is here and the kingdom is here. That’s not quite what Jesus is saying. He is saying that the King is here and the kingdom is near. So Jesus’ two opening statements are not exactly synonymous. “The time is fulfilled” and “the kingdom is near” are not one and the same. Some scholars have tried to argue that they are. They want to hear Jesus proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom. However, he doesn’t say that the kingdom has arrived. He says that the kingdom has approached. He

doesn't say that the kingdom is here but that the kingdom is near. It is at hand.

B. The Kingdom of God is Near

Now we turn from “the time is fulfilled” to “the kingdom of God is near.” But how near? If the kingdom is near at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when does it finally arrive? When can we say that the kingdom is here rather than just near?

1. Jesus’ Miracles

In the Gospels there is a pattern to Jesus’ miracles. At a very basic level we need to see a relationship between the exorcisms of Jesus and his temptation by the devil in the wilderness. This is the connection that Jesus himself draws in Matthew 12:29: “How can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.” Satan is the strong man and Jesus has come to despoil his house. This is clearly what Jesus is doing when he is casting out demons. He is robbing the strong man’s house. To do that he first had to bind the strong man. When did he perform this remarkable feat? There is only one possibility that presents itself. It was when he defeated Satan in the wilderness. It was a titanic victory that clearly had kingdom dimensions. This became particularly clear when the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. Universal, cosmic lordship is on the line. Jesus has come to set up his kingdom and to destroy the kingdom of Satan. The first showdown comes with the temptations in the wilderness. Satan suffers his first major defeat. From his victory in the desert Jesus follows through by expelling demons. Perhaps it is significant that in Mark’s Gospel the very first miracle is an exorcism – the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue at Capernaum (1:21-28). With every exorcism the kingdom of Satan is being pushed back.

For Matthew and Luke (though not for Mark) these exorcisms are proof-positive that the kingdom of God has arrived. In Matthew 12:28 (and Luke 11:20) Jesus declares: “If I drive out demons by the Spirit (or finger) of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Yet even in these Gospels the exorcisms of Jesus are not only a sign of the kingdom’s arrival but also of its nearness (Matt 10:7-8). Jesus can therefore appeal to his victories over Satan and his demons as evidence of both the kingdom’s nearness and its arrival. For a tidy mind this is not a comfortable

observation. It just deepens the paradox between the already and the not yet, and it heightens the tension between the present and the future. In this regard Herman Ridderbos has made a very down-to-earth and wise observation:

It is remarkable that the gospel does not itself explicitly distinguish between the kingdom now and the kingdom later. It only says in one place that the kingdom of heaven *has* come, and in another passage that the kingdom *will* come. And it is often difficult to ascertain whether the kingdom is spoken of in the present or in the future.⁶⁸

Ridderbos is right, but it does leave us with some untidy loose ends. The paradox deepens. It turns out that the kingdom that Jesus proclaims is both present and future at the same time! It is pointless to try and get beyond that. Don't wrack your brain trying to solve it all. You'll never work out all the apparent contradictions. You simply won't. Believe me, many have tried! Just remember that Jesus has a massive kingdom agenda. Not only through his exorcisms but with every miracle he is driving back the kingdom of Satan. His kingdom program is simply enormous. He has come to set right everything that has gone wrong since the fall. He has come to roll back all the terrible effects of mankind's fall into sin. His miracles address precisely all that has become warped and twisted and skewed and ugly because of the fall. Now what has the fall done? It has brought all those dreaded "d's" into the world – demon possession, disease, disaster, dearth and death. So what does Jesus do?

- The demon possessed are set free.
- The diseased are healed.
- Disaster is averted – think of the storm at sea.
- Dearth is transformed into abundance – as with the feeding of the crowds.
- The dead are raised to life – namely Jairus' daughter, Lazarus and the widow's son.

Not just the exorcisms but every miracle of Jesus is made possible because of the preliminary binding of Satan in the desert. Every miracle is a kingdom miracle. Every miracle is further evidence that the rule of God has broken into our human situation. Every miracle is another reversal of the

⁶⁸ Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (trans. H. de Jongste; ed. R. O. Zorn; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 105.

effects of the fall. With every miracle Jesus is gaining new ground for the kingdom of God at the expense of the kingdom of Satan. In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew* Philip Yancey has given a superb explanation of the significance of Jesus' miracles:

As he strode through life Jesus used supernatural power to set right what was wrong. Every physical healing pointed back to a time in Eden when physical bodies did not go blind, get crippled, or bleed nonstop for twelve years and also pointed forward to a time of re-creation to come. The miracles he did perform, breaking as they did the chains of sickness and death, give me a glimpse of what the world was meant to be and instill hope that one day God will right its wrongs. To put it mildly, God is no more satisfied with this earth than we are; Jesus' miracles offer a hint of what God intends to do about it.

Some see miracles as the implausible suspension of the laws of the physical universe. As signs, though, they serve just the opposite function. Death, decay, entropy, and destruction are the true suspensions of God's laws; miracles are the early glimpses of restoration. In the words of Jürgen Moltmann, "Jesus' healings are not supernatural healings in a natural world. They are the only truly 'natural' things in a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded."⁶⁹

All in all the four Gospels attribute thirty-five distinct miracles to Jesus. There are also summary statements. So obviously he performed more than the ones that are specifically mentioned. These thirty-five can be broken down into four major categories:

- Six were exorcisms.
- Seventeen were healings.
- Eight were nature miracles or power miracles.
- Four involved raising the dead.

The last group is the key to all the others, because the resurrection of Jesus is the great miracle. It is the miracle par excellence. All the other miracles point forward to this one great miracle. The resurrection is the miracle of miracles in the Gospels: (a) it was the greatest healing; (b) more than any exorcism it was *the* casting out of Satan (John 12:31); (c) it was the greatest

⁶⁹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew: Why No One Who Meets Him Ever Stays the Same* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995), 180-81.
Vox Reformata, 2007

demonstration of divine power; and (d) even greater than raising others from the dead was the fact that Jesus himself rose from the dead.

The resurrection is also the central miracle. All the Gospel miracles point forward to it and all the apostolic miracles in Acts relate back to it. The apostles' miracles authenticate their preaching of the resurrection. It is the pivotal miracle that holds the entire Gospel story together, that holds all of the NT together. The resurrection is also the great kingdom miracle. Because of it the kingdom reaches new heights. The resurrection marks a turning point in the advance of the kingdom. By overcoming death Jesus has struck a mortal blow at the heart of Satan's kingdom. Each Gospel develops this point in different ways. For Mark, Jesus is the Servant-King, so the kingdom arrives (paradoxically) when the King is crucified. For Matthew the kingdom comes when Jesus rises from the dead and proclaims: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (28:18) For Luke-Acts the kingdom advances when it breaks out of the confines of Judaism and Gentile lands are won for the gospel. So in the Synoptics there are differing nuances but the resurrection remains central. Because of Jesus' resurrection the kingdom has a great and glorious future.

2. *The Parables of Jesus*

If the miracles provide evidence for the kingdom, the parables give sketches of the kingdom. The miracles are signs of the kingdom; the parables are pictures of the kingdom. The miracles demonstrate the kingdom; the parables illustrate the kingdom. While we can identify some thirty-five miracles in the Gospels, the number of parables is almost impossible to tell. The reason for this lies in the fact that Jesus' language is so generously steeped in imagery and metaphor. Scholars generally estimate that there are somewhere between 30 and 60 parables or parabolic sayings that the Synoptic Gospels attribute to Jesus. (John has a lot in the way of figurative language but strictly speaking no parables as such). A conservative estimate would suggest that there are forty parables in the Gospels.⁷⁰ Of these forty only sixteen begin with a formula such as "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Even so, it would be fair to say that all the parables of Jesus are about the kingdom, whether directly or indirectly. Sometimes the focus may be on the King, sometimes it is on the subjects and at still other times it is on life in the kingdom; but the bottom line is that every parable in one way or another illustrates some aspect of the kingdom.

⁷⁰ Thus Simon Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

So how would you illustrate the kingdom? This was a challenge that was once given to my wife when she illustrated bulletin covers for a church publisher. Her assignment was to find illustrations for each of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. What do you do when you get to the petition, "Thy kingdom come"? Finally she came across a photo that said it all. It was the picture of a bright yellow flower growing in the middle of a garbage dump. It wasn't a bad choice. This was this kind of challenge that faced Jesus all the time. How could he get his message across to the common people? He could have said, "Well, the kingdom I am ushering in is a paradox between the present and the future. It's really a tensive symbol. It embraces within its purview both rule and realm. It is in fact a multi-dimensional reality." That might have been a very accurate definition, but it would have inspired nobody. It would hardly have set the world on fire. So Jesus never gives a definition of the kingdom. He doesn't approach his subject like a philosopher but like an artist. What he comes up with is really a multi-media presentation. There's the snapshot, the still life, the portrait, the panorama, even the moving picture. Jesus is a brilliant artist. He paints with words and he has fascinated art-lovers ever since. The genius of his style is such that in his hands the tensions inherent in the kingdom concept readily dissolve. All the paradoxes and tensions and differing dimensions of the kingdom are captured by his seemingly simple stories. The story of the sower or the seed growing secretly, the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price – viewed together they demonstrate the comprehensive character of the kingdom.

The parables therefore provide a tremendous perspective on the kingdom of God. With Jesus the reign of God has come. The kingdom is the dynamic rule of God. God is now living with his people. How do we know? Because his rule becomes visible in the lives of the subjects of the kingdom. Let me challenge you with a great homework exercise. Go through the Gospels and make a list of all the parables. That list becomes your photo album or movie or DVD of life in the kingdom. That's the way Jesus pictures his kingdom in this world. Here are just some samples to show what this kingdom looks like:

- Prayers are persistently yet humbly offered.
- Lame and blind people are invited to parties.
- Wayward sons are welcomed back in style.
- The seed is sown.
- The naked are clothed.

- The hungry are fed.
- Good Samaritans are out in force.
- Social outcasts are won.

In short, worldly values are put on their head. This life-style is totally at odds with that of the non-Christian world. So the pertinent question is this: Do people see the kingdom manifested in our lives? Do they see it in our personal lives as its citizens? Do they see it in our churches as kingdom communities? Are the parables pictures of us and of God's rule in our lives? In today's world do people also see the beautiful yellow flower or only the garbage dump? Are we living out the parables?

A very creative way of living out the parables is found in John White and Ken Blue's book, *Healing the Wounded*. There he tells the story of Robert, a member of an Evangelical church and a youth leader, who had fallen into homosexual sin. Once this became known he was put under church discipline. Robert reacted very negatively, became very bitter and was estranged from the church, but the elders continued praying for him and the Lord worked powerfully in his life. Five years later he rang one of the senior leaders asking for his relationship with the church to be restored. The response to that request was amazing. Here is the end of the story as told in the authors' own words:

A supper was arranged. While the pastoral team did not prepare a roasted calf, they did serve barbequed veal, and they presented him with a sports jacket and a gold ring, symbols of the return of the prodigal son. Robert was stunned and embarrassed with the warmth he received.⁷¹

So maybe the parables are not just pictures of the kingdom, they are paradigms for ministry. When that happens, our church communities also become pictures of the kingdom.

3. *The Sermon on the Mount*

Perhaps the most magnificent picture of the kingdom community is found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. The Sermon is above all a kingdom document. It is about life in the kingdom. It is a detailed statement of what kingdom life looks will. It is the charter of the kingdom if you will. What the Magna Carta was to England, what the Constitution is to the

⁷¹ John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 151.

United States, the Sermon on the Mount is to the kingdom of heaven. As those historical documents have given a certain character and quality of life to the countries concerned, so the Sermon brings out the character and quality of kingdom life. It speaks of the character, standards and way of life of the kingdom that Jesus is ushering in. Again if we do not understand what Jesus means by the kingdom, we will not understand the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon begins with the Beatitudes; and how do the Beatitudes begin? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” (5:3) And how do the Beatitudes end? “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” (5:10) The Beatitudes both begin and end with the kingdom. Of both the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake it is said that theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The reign of God has become a present reality in the lives of these people. Nevertheless all of the intervening blessings are cast in the future tense: They *will* be comforted, they *will* inherit the earth, they *will* be filled, they *will* receive mercy, they *will* be called sons of God, they *will* see God (5:4-9). These are all kingdom promises that will be fully realized only in the kingdom’s glorious future. They have their beginnings now but will be fulfilled only when the kingdom comes in glory. Hence these Beatitudes are a gospel declaration. They are pronouncements of eschatological blessing on the true people of God. They are declarations of God’s grace. They are the gospel of the kingdom.

Yet this very recognition of the Beatitudes as gospel declarations raises a rather provocative question. It is simply this: As preachers what have we tended to do with the Beatitudes? We have transformed them from indicatives to imperatives! We have taken these gospel declarations and turned them into ethical injunctions. But that’s not what the Beatitudes are all about. The Beatitudes are not about what we must do, they are not even about what we must become. The Beatitudes state what by God’s grace we are. The only commands are in verse 12 where we are told to rejoice and be glad! This is what a person looks like who has been transformed by the grace of God. This is what a person looks like, this is what communities look like, where God reigns. This is what people look like who on a daily basis experience the rule of God in their lives. These are the people that Jesus calls the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He doesn’t tell them to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is what, by the grace of God, they already are. All they are told to do is to let their light shine (v. 16). This is what the gospel of the kingdom has made them. Most of the verbs at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount are indicatives.

There are no “musts”, “shoulds” or “oughts”. There are only blessings and promises. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. All they have to do is to rejoice and be glad and let their light shine.

So are there no commands for those who live under the gracious reign of God? Are there no ethical imperatives for the citizens of the kingdom? Is there to be no response to grace? Yes, there is. In the Sermon on the Mount the response to grace comes by obedience to the law. In verse 17 Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy but to fulfill,” and then he spends the rest of chapter 5 expounding the law. Notice what law it is. It is the King’s law. It is the law of the kingdom. In five out of the six quotes in Matthew 5 Jesus is again quoting from the book of Deuteronomy. If that law is good enough for the King, it is good enough for his subjects. What Jesus is doing is not laying aside the law, but guarding it from wrong interpretations. He understands it the way it was always meant to be understood. He is applying it the way it was always meant to be applied. It was never meant to be merely an external moral code. He is incisively applying it to the human heart. Kingdom righteousness therefore surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. It begins with a correct interpretation and application of the King’s law.

So the righteousness of the kingdom cannot be divorced from obedience to the law. The Sermon’s remaining references to the kingdom have precisely this perspective. In the Lord’s Prayer “Thy kingdom come” goes hand in hand with “Thy will be done.” How can we do the King’s will without obeying his law? Then Jesus admonishes us to seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness (6:33). Again how can we understand God’s righteousness apart from his law? Towards the end of the Sermon Jesus issues a solemn warning: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” And what is the Father’s will but that we obey his law, that we live out the Sermon on the Mount?

So in the Sermon we have an eloquent expression of the multi-dimensional nature of the kingdom. Here Jesus preaches the gospel of the kingdom and he also teaches an appropriate response ethic. For Jesus that kingdom has come, is coming and is yet to come.

Conclusion

As preachers we live in the time of fulfillment. In Jesus one OT promise after another has been fulfilled. With his resurrection the kingdom has reached new heights. Even so, there is still a sense in which the kingdom is near rather than here. We still live between the times. The kingdom has come in grace, but it has yet to come in glory. The great finale is yet to come. The King who came in grace will next time come in judgment. Therefore the last part of Jesus' saying in Mark 1:15 applies to us as well: "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is near. *Repent and believe the gospel.*" Why should people repent and believe? Because the time has come and kingdom of God is near. Soon the kingdom will come with power and great glory. Therefore with great urgency and great conviction let us preach our hearts out. Let's do what Jesus did and tell people to repent and believe the gospel!