

MARK – LOVE WINS

What kind of Kingdom?

Mark began by announcing the good news about Jesus the Messiah. He reminded his readers that God was not doing nothing in the 400 years since he last spoke through Malachi. He powerfully described how God was present at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when God said: "I claim you, I love you, I'm proud of you," at his baptism.

He invited us to realise that we can be part of the work that Jesus came to do – the work of the kingdom of the heavens. He, perhaps, gave some clues as to what it will be like for those who choose to take up Jesus' invitation into the kingdom of God. And he began to show what the kingdom of the heavens might do in confronting evil and welcoming anyone who take up the invitation to live in God's bigger and better story. All the way through his gospel we find people asking, and trying to figure out, who is this man Jesus? And... what kind of kingdom does he bring?

Right now, in the U.K. and U.S. politicians are gearing up for elections. We know that in the U.S. by the end of this year, the election of the next president will have taken place. Already the process of each US state choosing their election candidates has begun. In the U.K. we might have a general election later this year – we don't yet know exactly when it will be, but we know it will be soon. Political parties are gearing up to announce to us what the United Kingdom will look like if we vote for them!

Mark will tell stories about what it's like in the kingdom of the heavens – the kingdom this Jesus came to bring.

⁴⁰ A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

⁴¹ Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴ "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the

sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. (Mark 1 v 40 -45)

Everyone knew the law. Everyone knew that you could not touch a leper – more than that. Everyone knew that lepers had to be banished. Everyone knew the law, and everyone knew that leprosy was a hopeless disease. Leprosy dictated you could no longer be with family or friends, or anyone, except other lepers. Everyone knew that leprosy was hopeless physically – there was no cure. Everyone knew that leprosy was hopeless socially – you were banished. Some diseases you can't see, but lepers were obliged to wear a bell and declare, everywhere they went, “Unclean, unclean.” There was no place for a leper in the kingdom of the day.

But this leper goes to Jesus: “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Perhaps its another way of asking: “So, Jesus, what kind of kingdom is your kingdom?” And here's the challenge: if Jesus can love, touch and heal a leper, then not only lepers, but everyone else can have hope.

“Then Jesus, moved with compassion, reached out and touched him – I am willing,” he said “be clean.”

One way to understand this is to say that Jesus feels the leper's pain in his gut – that's compassion. If he had simply spoken the words, that would have been enough, he would have been healed. But Jesus reached out and touched the leper. In that act, Jesus announces the kingdom of the heavens is a kingdom where the hopeless find compassion.

Those who take up the invitation of the kingdom of the heavens are invited to demonstrate the same compassion.

How are you doing, friends?

One day Jesus is teaching in a house. Everyone present knows that only God can forgive sin. Suddenly, as Jesus is speaking, a hole in the roof opens up, and a man on a mat is lowered through the newly created hole. (You can read this story in Mark 2 v 1-12) Brought by his friends, the paralysed man now finds himself at the feet of Jesus with no way of escape. When Jesus saw what was happening, and the faces of the friends peering down through the roof, he says to the man on the mat: “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

The teachers of the law are livid. This is blasphemy. Only God can forgive sin. Jesus, knowing what they were thinking, challenged them: “Is it easier to say – your sins are forgiven, or get up, take your mat and go home?” Everyone knows the answer! It’s far easier to say your sins are forgiven. After all, how can you possibly prove someone’s sins are forgiven? You can’t! But if you tell a paralysed man to pick up his mat and go home, everyone will know whether it happened.

So, to show that he could bring forgiveness, Jesus says to the man: “Pick up your mat and go home.”

Friends, we have to be careful of making a direct link between sickness (in its broadest terms) and forgiveness. Perhaps it is true to say that sin is like a sickness and that forgiveness is like having your health restored. Perhaps it is also true that both sin and disease are harmful and destructive to human life, and that the kingdom of the heavens has something to say about that. And, perhaps, it is also true, that this man’s life was never the same again. To know forgiveness is to know that we are truly, fully and eternally loved. And those who take up the invitation of the kingdom of the heavens can know forgiveness.

How are you doing?

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”
(Mark 2 v 13-17)

Everyone knows who the wrong kinds of people are. If the Galileans organised a ‘most hated person’ competition, Levi would win easily. Sitting at the toll gate in Capernaum, he would take what he could get from everyone and anyone. He would amass a fortune while bleeding others dry. He makes a profit by

cheating, intimidation and bribery. And of course, it's the poor and the powerless who are the victims of his crimes. Everyone knows he is a sinner.

Levi has no friends, no social life outside of those who are just like him. In truth, he probably cuts a 'lonely figure' who knows he is despised and hated. He may have all the luxuries money can buy, but he only has those who are like him with whom he can enjoy it. He's really just a hireling for the hated Roman government and no-one, Jews or Romans, wants anything to do with him. And then one day Jesus walks past his tax booth and invites him to be a disciple. They go to Levi's house for dinner and are joined by a whole host of sinners. Jesus, it seems, is comfortable among the wrong kinds of people.

What kind of kingdom is this?

One of Michelangelo's famous sculpture is 'Our Lady of Piety' -Here's a picture of his work, the intricate detail is remarkable.



It shows, his mother Mary holding Jesus' body after it has been taken down from the cross. It is, in truth, extraordinary. But there is a legend behind the work that makes it even more remarkable. Too poor to buy his own marble for the sculpture, he sifted through the off-cuts, rejects, or left-over marble of others. Michelangelo could see what others could not in the rejected stone he chose. From something rejected by others, Michelangelo created a miracle of artistic creation.

Jesus says to Levi: "Follow me." Levi, who will take a new name, Mathew, which means 'Gift of God,' would go on to write his own account of the story of Jesus

for a Jewish audience that neither, Mark, Luke or John could do. By calling Levi to follow him, going to his house for dinner and sharing it with sinners, Jesus sends a message loud and clear: the Kingdom of the Heavens brings hope to those who are hated and those who class themselves as hopeless. Those who take up the invitation of the kingdom of the heavens are bringers of hope to those rejected and scorned by others.

How are you doing?

One of the challenges we may still have today, that we might share with the Pharisees, is that we can make the Christian life a burden. Fasting was a good thing, a gift, a great spiritual discipline. The Pharisees had turned it into a burden. In verses 18-22, Jesus challenges the notion that to live in the kingdom of the heavens should be a burden. He says, when you go to a wedding, you don't fast, you feast! He's picking up on the well-known idea that the people of Israel were the bride, metaphorically married to God.

The point is: life with God is meant to be full of joy, not a burden to be endured! This radical new idea (or at least new to those watching Jesus) is too much for the old way of understanding – old wine skins. To embrace this new kingdom, this new way of being, you need to think differently – you'll need new wine skins! Those who take up the invitation of the kingdom of the heavens, will live in the joy of life with God.

How are you doing, friends?

When Jesus and his disciples ate grain and ate it on the Sabbath, it was like a declaration of war about the Sabbath (v 23-28). The rules that governed the Sabbath had become a crushing burden on the people. The Romans knew who King David was, so Mark uses the example of him eating bread that was only for priests, because he was hungry. David broke a law, but the disciples had only challenged a man-made tradition. What Jesus is saying is that God is far more interested in meeting human need, than he is about protecting or upholding man-made traditions.

The law, and all the additions, had become something it was never meant to be. The Sabbath was given as a gift of grace: the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath! Jesus is not saying: "Hey, you can do what you like on the Sabbath, it's just the same as any other day – it really does not matter!" But neither is he saying: "Hey, don't step out of line, keep the rules whatever they are!" He is saying: "Hey, this is about grace, not law. Use this gift wisely

because it is given to you to help you and to meet at least some of your needs like rest and renewal.”

Those who take up the invitation of the kingdom of the heavens are invited to live in this grace.

How are you doing?

3 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. ²Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

⁴Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

⁵He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mark 3 v 1-6)

This man’s withered hand is evidently not a birth defect, but the result of disease. Although it means he can’t work, it is not a matter of life and death, and because its not a matter of life and death, he can’t be healed on the Sabbath! No, he has to wait for a week day. That’s the rule! Seriously, that’s the rule!

Jesus sees it differently. In the kingdom of the heavens, mercy trumps rules! Jesus is fully aware that by asking the man to stand and stretch out his hand, he will get himself in trouble. He does it anyway. Because, truth is, that’s exactly why he came: to challenge the kingdom of the world and to demonstrate how things are in the kingdom of the heavens.

The kingdom of the heavens is the kingdom in which mercy shines through. Ironically, for the Pharisees, by asking the man to stretch out his hand, Jesus breaks no law, and by obediently stretching out his hand the man breaks no law. The law of the Pharisees is intact! But Jesus has shown the effect and the power that mercy brings to the people God so loves.

Those who take up the invitation of the kingdom of the heavens live in the mercy of the God who loves them because he loves them, because he loves them.

So, friends how are you doing?

The kingdom of the heavens: what kind of kingdom? It is a kingdom of compassion, forgiveness, hope, joy, grace and mercy! And what does it look like? Maybe it looks like this:

You know, when we met, I began to discover a new vulnerability, a warmth and a lack of pretence that impressed me. I saw in you a thriving spirit – no signs of internal stagnation anywhere. I could tell you were a growing person and I liked that. I saw you had strong self-esteem, not based on the fluff of self-help books, but on something a whole lot deeper. I saw that you lived by convictions and priorities and not just by convenience, selfish pleasure and financial gain. And I had never met anyone like that before.

I felt a depth of love and concern as you listened to me and didn't judge me. You tried to understand me, you sympathized and you celebrated with me, you demonstrated kindness and generosity – and not just to me, but to other people as well.

And you stood for something. You were willing to go against the grain of society and follow what you believed to be true, no matter what people said, and no matter how much it cost you. And for those reasons and a whole host of others, I found myself really wanting what you had. Now that I've become a Christian, I wanted to write to tell you I'm grateful beyond words for how you lived out your Christian life in front of me.

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