

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

June 13/14, 2009

“The Kingdom of God” —Mark 4:26-34

“The Kingdom of God ...” The Gospel according to Mark, from which our text for today is taken, begins the account of Jesus’ life and ministry with these words: “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God, saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel.’”

The rest of Mark’s Gospel goes on to recount just what that means – what the Kingdom of God is and how Jesus went about establishing it through what he said and what he did and how people are made a part of that Kingdom through him both now and for eternity.

But for all the talk about the Kingdom of God in Mark, Jesus never once tried to define it. And none of his listeners ever asked him what it meant when he spoke of it. As a matter of fact, it seems that Jesus used the term as if everyone already understood it. And apparently they did, at least superficially. As John Bright said in his book, *“The Kingdom of God”*, “The term ‘Kingdom of God’ lay within the vocabulary of every Jew during Jesus’ time here on earth. It was something they understood in their minds and desperately hoped for in their hearts.” But to people like us, he says, it may seem to be a strange term and if we don’t understand the term we can neither fully understand what Jesus had to say about it or appreciate what he did to establish it among us as well.

And so we look to Scripture, especially to the Old Testament, to help us understand. While the term “Kingdom of God” is not found too often in the Old Testament the idea of it certainly is. It’s rooted in God’s promise to Abraham and it involves the notion of the direct rule of God over His people just like a king rules over his kingdom – a rule that would result in good for the people of God and for vindication for all those who live under that rule. And key to this rule of God was the Messiah – the King of Kings who would establish God’s Kingdom forever.

It’s easy to understand how some of the Jews in Jesus’ time came to think that this Kingdom of God would be an earthly kingdom and that the Messiah would be an earthly king. They were looking for a king and a kingdom like the other kingdoms of this world – a political kingdom established and maintained by military force – a “bread” kingdom where all the hungry would be fed and taken care of – a physical kingdom where the lame would walk again and the blind would see again and the deaf would hear again.

But this was not the kind of Kingdom of God that God had in mind nor was it the kind of Kingdom that Jesus came to establish as the Messiah. The kind of Kingdom God had in mind and that Jesus established through his life, death and resurrection wasn’t an earthly kingdom at all. It was a divine one where God would rule from within rather than over. It wasn’t the kind of kingdom to be seen with the eye as much as by the heart. It wasn’t

the kind of kingdom to be established and maintained by military force or political maneuvering but rather a kingdom established by grace through faith in the One who would ultimately suffer and die on a cross. The kind of Kingdom that God had in mind and that Jesus had come to establish was really quite different from what most people thought it would be.

The parables contained in our Gospel lesson for today speak not of great political force or military might or really of anything this world considers important or powerful but rather of seemingly small, insignificant things. They speak not of things that are plain but rather of things that are hidden and made plain only by faith. They speak of the Gospel – that is, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ – as seed, seed that is planted in the ground of people’s souls and mysteriously and wondrously seed that grows into something great and wonderful. Such is the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, for that is what happens when the Gospel is taken to heart by people who repent and believe for, in that, they are made members of the Kingdom of God within by faith and are enabled to bear fruit to eternal life. It’s in this way, Jesus says, that God seeks to establish His Kingdom, His rule, in the hearts and lives of not just the Jews but of all people and not just for a limited time here on earth but for an eternity in heaven.

But this Kingdom wasn’t the kind of kingdom that many of Jesus’ time were looking for and because it wasn’t many rejected it and the One who came to establish it. But for those who were open to Jesus and to the Word of God He brought, to those who had no preconceptions or preconditions of what God should do, to those who were truly looking for God’s Kingdom in their own lives, it was exactly what they needed. And they believed.

What was true some two thousand years ago it still true today. There are many today who are looking for a different kind of kingdom – a kingdom where might makes right rather than a kingdom where right makes might – a kingdom established and maintained by military force or political maneuvering or economic power rather than a kingdom established by love and grace and mercy – a kingdom where temporal security is valued more highly than eternal well-being.

And because many are looking for this kind of kingdom, they fall prey to the many “would-be-kings” of this world and, in the process, miss the Kingdom of God and the King of Kings altogether. But for those who are still open to God’s Word, for those who still repent and turn and believe the Gospel, for those in whom the Holy Spirit lives and whose lives are changed, the Kingdom of God is still planted today. Oh, it may look as small and insignificant as a mustard seed but it still grows into the biggest and best of all things in their hearts and in their lives and, in that, they are enabled to bear abundant fruit to the glory of God and to the welfare of their neighbor.

Such is the Kingdom of God. And such are the parables of the Kingdom. May God continue to bless our place in His Kingdom by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and may we bear abundant fruit for His name’s sake. Amen.