

HOW THE KINGDOM COMES

Mark 4:26-34

17 January 2010 | Dan McCoig

Jesus also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.' He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

1.

Consider for a moment how kingdoms come.

If we survey history, we discover that kingdoms advance by force and violence, with falling bombs and flying bullets.

Jesus' friends certainly knew how the Roman kingdom had come to Palestine.

Their ancestors knew how the Assyrian kingdom had come, how the Babylonian kingdom had come, and how the Persian kingdom had come.

Kingdoms come by force and violence – swords and spears, armies and navies, taxation and police forces.

Jesus' friends were not out of line in expecting God's kingdom to come in a similar fashion; only God's force would be unmatched and unparalleled.

God's violence would be a righteous violence in the service of justice.

Since, however, God's kingdom is so very different than any human and earthly kingdom, the way in which it advances differs radically as well.

So, how exactly does God's kingdom come?

Keep that question in the front of your mind.

2.

Presently, we are more than halfway through exploration of our theme of *Getting to Know the Jesus You Thought You Already Knew*.

It makes sense then that here at a little beyond the midway point that we would explore the nature of God's kingdom and the way in which it comes into human history.

After all, the kingdom of God is Jesus' primary proclamation.

3.

I've always been intrigued by that fact that Jesus told stories, namely parables, to convey who God is, what God's kingdom is all about, how we are to relate to God and neighbor, and how we are to live fully as citizens of God's kingdom.

Let's spend a little time reviewing what we know about parables.

Author and speaker Brian McLaren identifies three marks of a parable.

One, a parable ordinarily ends with a repeated phrase.

For example, Jesus often concludes his parables with "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.

This is Jesus' way of saying – don't just listen with your ears, listen with your heart; don't just hear my words, hear my deeper meaning; don't listen for the literal meaning accessible to your rational mind, seek deeper meaning that requires you to make a personal investment of your sincere effort and your imagination.

Two, a parable involves a hiddenness, which eventually becomes visible. For example, Jesus' parable of the growing seed in Mark 4 has generic seeds planted in a generic field.

What they are is hidden.

In the telling of the story, we discover that each seed possesses the potential of a mature plant and eventually a harvest of many more seeds, that are hidden in the soil where their mysterious germination and growth is concealed until they sprout and mature.

And three, a parable involves surprise.

For example, in Jesus' parables we find a surprising variety of harvests, a surprising infestation of weeds, a surprising size of the full-grown mustard plant.

Here is how a parable works, especially on the lips of Jesus.

A parable hides the truth so that we need to do more than simply hear with our ears or read with our eyes on a literal level.

A parable hides the truth for which we have to invest ourselves in an imaginative search for meaning.

McLaren remarks "Parables entice their hearers into new territory."

He adds that:

If the goal is an interactive relationship, a parable succeeds where easy answers and obvious explanations couldn't. With a clear and easy explanation, hearers can listen and achieve understanding and then go on their way, independent of the teacher. But when a parable confounds them, it invites them to ask questions, so they continue to depend on the teacher himself, not just their independent understanding of their words.

Consider how persons respond to confusion.

We usually respond in one of two ways.

We can respond with arrogant and impatient anger.

We may say something like "I have no idea what he's saying. This is a waste of time."

We usually make remarks like this on our way out the door.

Or, we can respond with eager and curious humility.

We might say things like "I can't let this go. I must know more."

So we come back for more.

Parables can be and often are confusing.

They are confusing by design.

Yes, Jesus uses them to inform us.

But, more importantly, Jesus uses them to transform us.

Fans and detractors of Jesus have criticized him as being a little too subtle in some of his teachings, a little too indirect, and overly secretive.

Such criticism is legitimate if Jesus' goal was information and information only.

If that were his goal he could have had a scribe draft a memorandum and circulated it among his followers.

But Jesus did not simply want his followers to know something.

He wanted them to be someone.

Again, his goal was and is transformation.

We can know a lot of religious things – the books of the Bible in order, the Ten Commandments, the 23rd Psalm, the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer.

But if our lives do not commend the others the Lord whose name we bear as Christians, then what is the point?

We have simply demonstrated that we are well-informed and very poorly transformed.

According to McLaren, parables help to shape our hearts in such a way that we are humble enough to admit we don't understand everything and thirsty enough to keep asking questions.

Parables render their hearers not as experts, not as know-it-alls, not as scholars, but as children.

After all, remember to whom the kingdom belongs – children.

Unlike adults, children are dependent rather than independent.

They can't learn unless they ask questions from people they trust.

A child's curiosity is unquenchable.

A child's inquisitiveness is passionate.

These are the kinds of people to whom the kingdom of God belongs.

4.

The path by which we make our way into God's kingdom is repentance.

Repentance means in part to rethink – that is, to reconsider our direction and consider a new one; to admit that we might be wrong; to give our life a second thought.

Jesus' admonition to Nicodemus in John's gospel – to be born again – illustrates repentance.

Jesus is saying, in essence, to become a child again.

Nicodemus – you are too independent, too self-centered, too set on stubbornly sticking to your own self-determined path, you are an arrogant know-it-all, you are close-minded, you are an overconfident non-thinker.

And what is the remedy for all those maladies, with which entrance into the kingdom becomes highly problematic if not downright doubtful?

The remedy is this – to become childlike, that is to become teachable because we once again become unquenchably curious and passionately inquisitive.

5.

So, how does God's kingdom come?

It advances by stories.

By tales that can be easily ignored.

By tales that are often easily misunderstood.

If we want information to know, God's kingdom is not for us.

However, if we want transformation to become and be, God's kingdom is for us.

God's kingdom, which abides in human hearts, advances slowly, silently like a seed sprouting in the soil beneath the surface.

The human heart cannot be coerced.

It cannot be forced.

One person can never demand love from another.

But the human heart can be invited.

It can be attracted.

It can be intrigued.

It can be enticed.

It can be challenged.

And there is the genius of the advance of God's kingdom by parable.

Subtly, gently, indirectly, with all due respect to our dignity, never battering us into submission, the parables of Jesus, which embody God's kingdom, leave us free to discover and choose for ourselves.

As much as we might like it to, God's kingdom does not come as a simple formula.

It does not come as a list of information.

It does not come as an angry threat or an ultimatum.

Rather, it comes in parable – like a treasure hidden in a field, like a seed hidden in soil, like yeast hidden in dough.

Could it really come any other way?
Amen.