

# *parables and the kingdom*

a sermon preached on the  
*third sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

In the opening movement of Mark's gospel, Jesus emerges from his post-baptismal wilderness testing experience with the blunt and bold *evangelion*: "The kingdom of God has approached".<sup>1</sup> The whole of the gospel story as it unfolds is a revealing of just what that means. What is this 'kingdom of God'?

In a rapidly-unfolding succession of encounters, the chapters between that beginning of the gospel and today's reading reveal that Jesus' understanding of the 'kingdom of God' is entirely at odds with the religious-political status quo. As we heard last week, Jesus' 'kingdom of God' is on a collision course with religious-political power – a course, the reader can see, inexorably leading to crucifixion-resurrection.

We recall that Mark's gospel was written for Mark's church community – a faith community facing persecution and great hardship, in Rome around 70CE. Theirs was a time of great suffering, and great uncertainty. How can one believe in this 'kingdom of God' in the face of the tumultuous upheavals taking place within synagogue, families, and city? How can we know that the 'kingdom of God' is come, especially when everything appears otherwise? What will be its sign?

Like people of every time and place, we want proof, assurance, certainty. We humans have for millennia linked the favour of the gods with outer and visible signs: this is nothing more than prosperity doctrine. Christianity as a world religion is a consequence of this same dynamic – the emperor Constantine concluding that he won the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 CE because he had instructed the Christian *Chi-Rho* symbol to be inscribed onto his soldiers' shields.<sup>2</sup> That this amounts to nothing more than ancient pagan superstition apparently bypassed everyone – and to this day Christians, like Muslims and others, assume that when we win a battle this amounts to God blessing us. And with the shift from guns to economic weapons we have concluded that the success of our commercial empires is proof of God's blessing.

And apparently no one notices that this is really no different from the Roman Empire, Israel religion establishment status quo into which Jesus bursts, overturning the tables<sup>3</sup> with his *evangelion*: "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, *they do not know how*".<sup>4</sup>

The 'kingdom of God' is not subject to empire status quo rules and expectations. It cannot be manipulated. It is not governed by 'market forces'. It is not proven by statistics or consumer demographics or 'market research'. It is not a 'works righteousness' trophy which anyone can claim credit for. It is not a commodity to be spruiked in the marketplace. It is not a franchise to dominate 'market share'.

No one knows how the kingdom of God 'sprouts and grows'. That is to say, no one can claim any kind of control over it, or credit for it. Its growth is a secret – an inner reality which comes from we know not where; a hidden Wisdom of the Divine heart; a profligate and undeserved fecundity of the eternal Goodness and Grace and Love. That's what makes it an *evangelion*!

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>2</sup> Greek: **ΧΡ** **Ρ**, the first two letters of the messianic title **Χριστός** *Christos*

<sup>3</sup> Mark 11:15-17

<sup>4</sup> Mark 4:26-27

In like manner, the ‘kingdom of God’ is the exact opposite of market logic in terms of scale: “It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds of the earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs”.<sup>5</sup>

Empires of every kind – political, economic, religious, whatever – claim to be right and successful on the basis of dominance of *quantity*. But the kingdom of God is the smallest thing in the world in terms of quantity. It appears to the eye of the person embedded in the logic of the status quo to be inconsequentially small – irrelevant even. In Matthew’s gospel we hear Jesus speak about this seemingly irrelevant kingdom in the metaphors of yeast and treasure hidden in a field.<sup>6</sup>

Who can believe this!

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation”.<sup>7</sup> “With many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables”.<sup>8</sup>

This, then, is precisely why Jesus’ message is called *evangelion*: for the ‘kingdom of God’ which has come upon us completely overturns all our expectations about what constitutes God’s activity and presence in the world. We want to be able to prove our worth according to statistics: and with demonstrations of our ability to control and manipulate. But God proves our worth according to an entirely different standard altogether.

And it is only on this basis that we have any legitimate mission as those baptised into Christ’s death and resurrection. We Christians are as neurotically fixated on statistics as everyone else – driven by ‘empire brains’ still, confusing market share with gospel, prosperity doctrine with Paschal Mystery. With rose-tinted spectacles upon an imagined former institutional glory, we are almost terminally sick with worry about the statistics of church attending, obsessed with the idea that it’s up to us to invent marketing schemes to guarantee the church’s future success.

“And [Jesus] sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation’”<sup>9</sup> – “except the sign of Jonah”,<sup>10</sup> which is, of course, the Paschal Mystery.

We stand at the entrance rite of the liturgy not because some vested persons are entering the building: but because we recognise the book of the *evangelion* which is brought among us; because we recognise that by this sign the kingdom of God is among us, that we desire to repent of our prosperity doctrine, to be reformed according to the gospel standard.

Thanks be to God, then, for the astonishing *evangelion* brought among us every time we make Eucharist –and every morning or evening as we read the gospel for the day. For the ‘kingdom of God’ has approached: defying our deadening prosperity doctrine expectations about both the method and the scale of its operation. The kingdom comes to us as that which grows in secret: which appears to us as the most pointless activity, the most inconsequential thing to do – just like the apparent smallness and inconsequentiality of the blessed Sacrament we receive – but which turns out to be Jesus’ gracious invitation to be transformed by the supreme value.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 4:31-32

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 11:33, 13:44

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16,17

<sup>8</sup> Mark 4:33-34

<sup>9</sup> Mark 8:12

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16:4