

Sermons at St Paul's

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus never exactly tells us what “The Kingdom of God” is. Today, in Matthew’s gospel, he tells us a lot of things that the Kingdom of God is like, so let’s spend some time trying to understand this phrase.

It is pretty clear that the Kingdom is not a political space or a particular geographical region. If we think about it as a series of relationships that embody justice and love, we seem to get closer to what Jesus was preaching.

Perhaps it helps us to know that the Hebrew word for justice can also be translated as “righteousness.” So the many references to righteous people in both the Old and New Testaments can be understood as the description of persons who live with love and justice in their hearts and actions. Such people are connected to others, and indeed to all God’s creation, by a web of relationships that embody righteousness.

It is really unfortunate that the word is used nowadays almost solely in the phrase “self-righteous” – or smugly satisfied that whatever one does is the right thing, and everyone else should be judged as inferior. Perhaps it is why the word justice has largely replaced the word righteous in our public and even church discussions. Let’s remind ourselves here that it is by God’s standard, not ours, that humans will be judged at the day of reckoning. We really, really want to know whether we will be recognized as citizens of the Kingdom of God when that time comes!

Well, let’s go back to the Kingdom of God, and ask how we will recognize it and enter it. When our actions are marked by Godly justice and love, and we meet the same qualities in others, we find ourselves in the Kingdom of God that Jesus described. And if you have ever found yourself in such a situation, you know that it is a place of quiet and deep joy. Young children who are raised in a safe, loving family and given clear rules and what they need to grow and thrive, know that place. They may not describe it as righteous, but they are happy citizens of God’s Kingdom.

Jesus (who was and is a true citizen of the Kingdom) said that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or a bit of yeast. It starts out as a small thing – one moment of overwhelming love, one experience of true justice – and it can grow into a large living presence, in a marriage, in a partnership, in a committed family or a nurturing community.

The Kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price, or a buried treasure in a field. It is worth selling everything you previously counted as valuable in order to obtain the Kingdom of God. To experience a world marked by godly love and true justice, is to enter the Kingdom of God, where there is peace passing all understanding.

Do you think in this era of fake news and a justice system that isn't just, a world of self-righteousness and scapegoating, we will recognize the Kingdom of God if we should go looking for it? Yes, but it will require prayer, discernment and deep caring! Perhaps that is why in both the other lessons we heard today, the quality of wisdom and the gift of God's Spirit are so praised.

Solomon's world sounds as though justice was a pretty rare commodity. It would take wisdom to decide how to govern with justice. The Roman system of justice was only for Roman citizens – and there were relatively few of them outside Italy. Otherwise, justice meant making sure that everyone obeyed the Emperor and his proxies all the time. In any argument, they won. Because Roman self-righteousness and scapegoating kept conquered populations under tight control, it was highly prized by the Emperor.

God rewarded Solomon for asking God for *“an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil....”* Godly justice is one important part of God's kingdom.

In our reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans, this little mini-essay on how God's love calls us, justifies us and glorifies us, reminds us that Godly love is the other essential part of God's kingdom.

What is the connection among wisdom, love and justice?

The quality of Wisdom was honored among the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean. The Greeks called it *sophia*, and the Romans *sapientia*. There's a whole book of the Old Testament named Wisdom.

Wisdom is not necessarily about knowing facts. Christian Wisdom is the product of prayer, thought and discernment, of life lived consciously in God's presence. It assumes an inner discipline: not just everything or only what comes next, but a careful assessment of what is good and what is evil, what helps and what hinders. That is what Solomon was asking God to give him: wisdom. Paul says that when we cannot pray or see what we are to do, the Spirit is actually interceding for us "with sighs too deep for words." The Spirit of God will provide wisdom when we feel it is beyond our ability.

So the Kingdom of God that Jesus describes without defining it, is a place where these three elements come together – justice, love and wisdom. How closely that echoes our understanding of God's Trinity of persons!

Over the millennia God the Creator and Father has been identified in the Old Testament as the ultimate source of Justice. In the New Testament, Jesus is named Truth and Love; the Holy Spirit the source of Wisdom. If justice, love and wisdom are the marks of the Kingdom and also of the Holy Trinity of God, then no wonder Jesus called the intersection of these qualities and Persons of God, "God's Kingdom."

Yes, this is elusive stuff and hard to talk about. But we do have an intuitive idea of what Jesus meant by the Kingdom from reading and hearing Jesus talk about it in the Gospels. This is reassurance that we are, deep within our own essence, the beloved children of God and part of God's good creation. We have indeed been made in the "image and likeness of God" and the Kingdom is our own country – if we choose to live in it. And our baptisms have marked us as "Christ's own forever."

Yes, with love in our hearts, and a desire for true justice in our actions, may we as adult Christians strive ever to discern God's desire for our lives and those of our families, communities, nation and world.

Welcome to the Kingdom of God, fellow citizens!

Amen.