

Sermon 16 June 2024 God's Kingdom

Romans 2:5-11 Matthew 25:31-46

I want to look at this well-known passage in light of God's kingdom, and what we mean by that. I refer to verse 34, *'Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.'* But firstly, I want to draw our attention to the last verse in this passage: *'And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'*

It is interesting that both punishment and reward in this instance are taken care of in the afterlife. There is no doubt that life is not always fair. Those that inflict pain and suffering, at times, appear to get away with it. You know the expression, 'to get away with blue murder.' You probably don't know the origin of that expression. Many, many years ago, murdering a royal person was regarded as the ultimate crime. If you committed that offence, you were more than likely to be hunted down and severely punished. Royals were often referred to as 'blue blooded,' hence the term 'blue murder.' So, if you somehow managed to avert being apprehended and punished for what was considered to be a reasonably serious crime, you were considered to have 'got away with blue murder.'

Anyway, the point is this – innocent people often suffer through absolutely no fault of their own. If we simply look at this physical life, this balance of justice is often missing. However, I believe we have to look at the complete picture, and this involves both this life and the next life. I believe the scales of justice will be balanced when we all come before God in our next life. This is what Jesus means, when he says, in referring to those who did not come to the aid of the King, *'And these will go away into eternal, punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'*

We heard Paul making this point in our first reading from Romans: *'For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.'*

This raises another very interesting point. Notice that those who are punished have not actually inflicted suffering on others, but rather they have refused to come to the aid of those who are suffering. In other words, theirs is a sin of omission rather than commission. By not coming to the aid of those in need, we are guilty.

When asked to care for our neighbour, we can respond in a variety of ways. It could be that we profess to be too busy – we just don't have the time. That actually means that we have other priorities, but I won't go into that right now. If it is a case of financial help, we could profess to not having enough money. We could profess that those suffering have only themselves to blame and don't really deserve our help. We can always find an excuse. That is a sin of omission.

On the other hand, we could respond by being prepared to make some sort of sacrifice and doing whatever we can to alleviate any suffering there might be. We can put ourselves out, and we will be rewarded. That might be in this life, it might well be in the next life. This brings us to just what we mean by 'God's kingdom.'

A point here with regards Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel focuses on Jesus as the Messiah, as the anointed king of God's people. The king was responsible for laying down law and obligations of the people. To be a member of God's kingdom, Jesus lays down our obligations in two very simple commandments – to love God and to love our neighbour. These two commandments are inextricably entwined and this point is

beautifully made in this story when the king says, *'Truly I tell you, just as you did it for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me.'* When we serve others, we serve God. Francis of Assisi took it a step further by saying that when we serve others, we worship God.

The underlying message of this passage is that by our obedience to God, to his commandments, we are judged worthy to participate in the kingdom of God. And of course, disobedience leads to non-inclusion in God's kingdom.

An excellent depiction of what God's kingdom should look like was written by Philip Yancey in his book, *'The Jesus I Never Knew.'* I quote: *'A society that welcomes people of all races and social classes, that is characterised by love and not polarisation, that cares most for its weakest members, that stands for justice and righteousness in a world enamoured with selfishness and decadence, a society in which members compete for the privilege of serving one another – that is what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God.'*

That really does sum it up so well, so completely. The responsibility lies with us individuals to create that environment through how we treat one another. Let me conclude with a story to illustrate.

There was this blacksmith who had a vision. An angel of God came to him and said, 'The Lord has sent me. The time has come for you to take up your abode in his kingdom.'

'I thank God for thinking of me,' said the blacksmith, 'but the season for growing crops will soon be here. The farmers will need their ploughs to be repaired and their horses shod. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but do you think I might put off taking up my abode in the kingdom until I have finished?' The angel looked at him in the loving way that angels do and said, 'I'll see what can be done.'

The blacksmith continued with his work and was almost finished when his neighbour fell ill right in the middle of the planting season. The blacksmith came to his aid and at about the same time the Lord's angel appeared to him again. The blacksmith pointed to the fields he was planting for his neighbour and pleaded, 'Do you think eternity can hold off a little longer? If I don't finish this job, my neighbour's family will suffer.' Again, the angel smiled and vanished.

Over the next few months, other people encountered problems and the blacksmith always stepped in to help. Whenever the angel reappeared, the blacksmith just spread his hands in gesture of resignation.

One evening, the blacksmith began to think about the angel and he had put him off for such a long time. Suddenly, he felt very old and tired and said, 'Lord, if you would like to send your angel again, I think I would like to see him now.' No sooner had he spoken than the angel stood before him. 'If you still want to take me,' said the blacksmith, 'I am now ready to take up my place in the Lord's kingdom.'

The angel looked at the blacksmith in surprise, smiled and said, 'Where do you think you have been all this time?'

I reiterate, we create and experience God's kingdom through what we do for others.