

Followers of the Way

The kingdom of God draws near

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Mark 1:1-15

I don't know about you, but when I was a child I always puzzled by Jesus' words, 'the kingdom of God draws near/is at hand'. What *was* the kingdom of God? What was he talking about? And what would it be like when it arrived? Children can be very literal, can't they? But I just assumed this was talking about something that was going to happen in the future. When Jesus returned, maybe ... or perhaps something we 'entered' when we died, if we acknowledged him as Lord now.

Well, it's taken me a long time to realise that that way of looking at things was completely wrong, because what Jesus was talking about wasn't some Star Wars type kingdom zooming towards Earth from outer space, and it wasn't about Peter welcoming us at the Pearly Gates – no, He was talking about *why* He'd come, and what God was doing. The kingdom of God really was at hand, because He was talking about the restoration of that direct relationship with God for which we'd been created, and which had been hopelessly destroyed – put beyond our reach – when Adam and Eve gave way to temptation and ate the forbidden fruit in Eden. By that one act – that choice – they'd put themselves under Satan's control, which of course meant bondage to sin and death. And also, of course, by giving allegiance to evil, they'd put themselves under a curse. Genesis 3: "To the woman, God said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." And to the man He said, "... cursed is the ground because of you.... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Because of that one crucial act of disobedience – that sin – Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden, and a Cherubim with a flaming sword was placed at the gate to stop them ever going back. Not because God was nasty and wanted to punish them – but because their choice had made it impossible for them to remain any longer in the garden, and to be in His presence.

But from that moment on, throughout the Bible, with its chequered history of mankind's hunger for spiritual meaning and significance, coupled with repeated disobedience, stupidity and, it has to be admitted, sometimes brazen wickedness, we know that God strove to keep us safe, while He got together the plan to set us free and win us back. And that plan, we know, took a lot of organisation and a long time. Throughout, God had tried every way He could, to help and protect us. He'd chosen the Jews to make Himself known – to reveal Himself – and He'd given them the law as a template, an instruction book, on how to live, till he could mount the counter-offensive and win us back.

But God knew that, without more, none of that would be enough. By ourselves there was no way we could break free from Satan and become whole, so that unless He Himself intervened, we'd always be damaged and less than we were meant to be. We'd be slaves to sin. Yes, there would be 'good' people, who tried faithfully to keep the law and live without sin ... but from the start this was a battle that, to succeed, needed divine fire power.

The Bible tells the story, the history, of God's plan for our redemption. It's the golden thread that runs throughout each and every book in the OT. Time and again, we see men and women failing to live up to the divine ideal and giving way to sin. And, because this was from the first a very carefully planned campaign, in God's love and patience, we see Him time and again chastising and disciplining them – not to destroy, but to draw them back to Himself and keep them under His protection, until the time that He could implement the plan to break, finally and forever, the bonds Satan had put in place.

Satan's plan all along was to destroy and separate us from God – and that's still his plan today. At all costs, the devil wants to prevent men and women from becoming fully what God has made and intends us to be, living in direct relationship with God.

So when Jesus began His ministry, 'proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news"', that is what He was talking about. God had finally brought His forces into position to mount the long-awaited counter-offensive that would smash Satan's illegitimate hold. And, though the battle was from the first only ever going to be fought by Jesus', to enter into that victory, it was absolutely vital that people severed their allegiance to Satan – to put it another way, that they repented ... because you can only have one lord. To take hold of God's gift, therefore, men and women had to repent and reject their allegiance to Satan – and they had to accept Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, as Lord.

All that Jesus did and said, during His short life on Earth, testified to the return of the inbreaking power and sovereignty of God. The casting out of demons and healings were physical manifestation – signs – of that power and of what God was doing. So in John 14, when Philip says to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied', Jesus could reply with absolute truth, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...'

Jesus, though a man, was and is God. He's the man that Adam was meant to be – but He's more. He's the incarnate *power* of God, which is now, through the Spirit, made available to us. I'll say it again, by His victory over Satan on the Cross, Jesus restored us to direct relationship with God and freedom. And through the Spirit, He makes that power available to us. So in Jesus, the Kingdom of God really was at hand. Because of what He did, we are restored – which means that we're under God's protection and that He'll watch over us, guide and protect us. We'll never again be alone and, in His service, He now gives us His authority and power. Think of yourselves as officers in the service of the King. He commands us, and with that authority goes His power – and if anyone tries to attack us, they take on, not us, but Him.

Final victory, when evil once and forever comes under judgment and is cast into the lake of fire, will only happen when Christ returns. So now we live in a between times, that's actually a time of dispensation, so that all might have a chance to hear that good news and be saved. But just as when Jesus was on earth, people have to choose. We cannot serve two masters.

And that's why, at this time, the spiritual battle is so intense, and why we're seeing this descent into chaos. The devil knows only too well that the writing's on the wall, and he's fighting to retain control. Just as in WW2, after D-Day, the Germans knew they were defeated, but the fighting, if anything, became even more intense.

Now is the time for us to stand in God's strength. Now is the time for us to use the weapons and the power He's given us, and the devil is trying might and main to stop us realising that power. As Philip reminded us last week, fear and doubt are major weapons in the devil's arsenal, and to counter that we need to hold to Christ.

In our nation, with a new Prime Minister, the death of the queen, and Charles' accession to the throne, we are in a time of change. Of transition. At one level, it's a time of mourning and grief, but it's also a time of hope, and of potentiality. For each one of us now, and for the nation as a whole, we must choose who we will serve: the devil, with his tawdry and delusional promises of power and control, or the Sovereign Lord God, who in return for our obedience promises freedom, protection, joy, power ... and the fulfilment that only He can give.

So, we echo Joshua in his address to Israel before his death. Joshua 24:14-15: "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

The kingdom of God is not some future, airy-fairy pie in the sky. It's present reality. But to enter into that kingdom and that power, we have to make a choice.

1. To what extent is the kingdom a 'reality' in our own lives?
2. How can we grow in realisation of the kingdom, and so become better channels for God's power?
3. How do we make this message known in a fallen world that rejects God?