

GOD'S KINGDOM: PRESENT AND FUTURE

Luke 12:32-40

First Jesus is talking about possessions – selling them, giving to the poor and investing instead in treasures in heaven. Next thing we know he is telling a parable about the end of time. There isn't any transition between them. What holds these thoughts together? How do they connect?

One thing that holds these thoughts together is that they both are about ultimate things. In telling us to sell our possessions to claim treasure in heaven rather than on earth Jesus is posing the question of *what are we living for? Where does our treasure – our ultimate source of happiness – lie?* From there he jumps immediately into a parable about the end of time and poses the question, *What are we expecting? Who are we expecting? And what (if anything) are we doing about it?*

Jesus' preferred answer to both these sets of questions is *the Kingdom of God* – God's reign. And that's the other thing that ties these two ideas together – what we value and our expectations about facing God at the day of judgment are both about how we live into the Kingdom of God, God's reign.

Jesus spoke a great deal about the Kingdom of God. He told many parables to help us catch glimpses of God's Kingdom. Over and over again Jesus would begin a parable by saying "*the Kingdom of God is like...*" a net, a seed, a pearl, a gardener, a field, a vineyard, etc. In today's Gospel reading we hear about the Kingdom of God which we can know here and now and also the Kingdom which is to come. As we reflect on this passage I'd like to work backwards, beginning with God's Kingdom to come and then moving to ways we may experience God's Kingdom today.

Throughout much of the New Testament and from Jesus himself there is an urgency about the expectation for the coming of the Son of Man. The early Church eagerly awaited the second coming of Jesus when he would come to judge the world and rule as King. In this parable the master's return is delayed. It's easy for the servants to lose their focus and become lazy as they await their master's return. The moral of the parable is to be prepared for your master is coming at an unexpected hour.

One of my favorite New Yorker magazine cartoons shows a panel of a wild eyed, long haired prophet wearing a sign board. On the front it reads "*the end is near.*" The second panel shows the prophet walking past us and the backside of the sign board, which reads, "*look busy!*" Jesus isn't concerned with appearances, what matters is being faithful with the gifts we have been given. Have we been faithful stewards of the gifts entrusted to us?

I love the Prayer Book collect for the stewardship of creation:

O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature: Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of

your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

After 2000 years we may have lost some of the urgency of waiting for Jesus to return. But death brings all of us to the time of judgment. Thinking of *the account we must all one day give* how would you live differently if you knew that you only had a couple months to live? What would you do differently? Several years ago country singer Tim McGraw had a hit song that asked that very question:

*He said I was in my early forties, with a lot of life before me
And one moment came that stopped me on a dime
I spent most of the next days, looking at the x-rays
Talking bout' the options and talking bout' sweet times.
I asked him when it sank in, that this might really be the real end
How's it hit 'cha when you get that kind of news?
Man what did you do? He said*

*I went sky diving
I went rocky mountain climbing
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu
And I loved deeper
And I spoke sweeter
And I gave forgiveness I'd been denyin'
And he said some day I hope you get the chance
To live like you were dyin'*

Sky diving or a ride on a wild bull might not be on my personal list of the five things I always wanted to do. But what would be most important to you? How would you live differently if you knew you would be meeting your maker a couple months from today?

God's rule is not only something that will take place at some day in the future or up in heaven. God's rule is also *now*, but it's hidden. God's life is all mixed together with the life of this crazy and broken world. Sometimes we get glimpses of what his rule looks like when we are able to discern God's presence, God's actions, God's life. Other times we don't see it at all.

Jesus spoke about some of the important values in God's Kingdom. The most important of all is love – love of God and love of neighbor. Another great value is openness, welcome. Jesus embraced and welcomed all kinds of people – the respectable and the disrespectable. He opened the doors of God's Kingdom wide to include sinners and broken people of all description who came to him in need. Transformed lives, beginning with repentance and the forgiveness of sins, God's power to heal, and the restoration of all things in God's great love, are some key Kingdom values.

We often pick up a Gospel passage in the middle of an important teaching. Today's passage follows Jesus' famous words about *considering the lilies, how they neither toil*

nor spin, yet even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of them. He was inviting his listeners to let go of their anxious worrying and to seek first after the things of God. Jesus then continues in today's Gospel reading inviting us to give some of our stuff (our possessions) away in order that we might to put our ultimate treasure not in possessions but in heaven. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* makes wonderful sense to me of Jesus' words

Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bank robbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It's obvious isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being. (The Message, vss. 33-34)

Recently there have been a flurry of articles and books about the *Hedonics*, the study of human contentment or happiness. It turns out that they are discovering that Jesus was right all along. Money doesn't buy happiness. Studies show an upswing in contentment moving from poverty to having our necessities met, but after that if there's any correlation between possessions and contentment it's a negative one. An article in of all places, *CNN Money.com* posits four key sources of happiness. 1) Relationships – building good relationships with loved ones, with our spouse, with friends and, I'm sure Jesus might add with God our Father, leads to happiness. 2) Busyness and productivity, but especially doing something that is both challenging and rewarding helps lead to contentment. 3) Positive thinking. Feeling positive about ourselves and not comparing ourselves negatively with others helps lead to happiness. 4) Gratitude. Count your blessings. Gratitude for the good gifts we have been given is another key ingredient to happiness. Aren't those also key ingredients to making true treasures in higher spheres than our stuff? (http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/moneymag_archive/2006)

Working backwards the good news of this passage comes at the beginning, where Jesus said, "*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.*" It reminds me of another Gospel passage in John 16:33 where Jesus says "*take courage I have conquered the world.*" Jesus himself opens the keys to God's Kingdom. He inaugurates the life of God's Kingdom in his own life, teaching, ministry and most especially through his death and resurrection. Through Jesus we are invited into the life, the values, the power and hope of God's Kingdom, God's rule. God's Kingdom is a gift, and what's better yet it is God's pleasure to give it.

So, as we think with Jesus about the ultimate questions of what we are living for and what we hope to find in the end, let us pray:

O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature: Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.