

International Meeting of the Medicine of the person.

St. John's College Durham. August 2005.

Bible Study. The Kingdom of God.

Readings.

Matthew 5.1-12. The Sermon on the Mount.

11.25-26. The Kingdom is revealed to little ones.

Mark 4.26-29. The Seed that Grows By Itself.

Luke 19.11-22a. The Parable of the Pounds.

As they were listening to this, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. So he said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, "Do business with these until I come back." But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to rule over us." When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, "Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds." He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities." Then the second came, saying, "Lord, your pound has made five pounds." He said to him, "And you rule over five cities." Then the other came, saying, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." He said to him, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave!"

At the moment when Jesus appears on the scene, there is a fundamental change. This morning's Bible readings speak of one area of change and the manner in which the Kingdom of God opens out and establishes itself among us. This morning, we reflect, then, on what the gospel teaches about the Kingdom of God. (The Bible uses both titles, Kingdom of Heaven or Reign of God).

The Sermon on the Mount brings consolation for the poor in heart, for the gentle, for those who seek justice. The persecuted are always seen as oppressed. The Kingdom of God is announced from the most distant times. Why is it that the gentle can henceforth rejoice about it? Because with the coming of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is revealed and another time announced in which the downcast are placed at the centre.

The little ones, who in my opinion, are in the same category as the oppressed, the gentle, and the sad, acknowledge more quickly than adults this change of direction. God has become nearer to us. With the coming of Jesus, the distance between God and man recedes and it is shown that the distance between God and man can be crossed from the point of view of childlike people. This means that we can do so if we adopt this childlike attitude.

That which has always existed, comes into blossom for us through Jesus. Jesus assures us that he has added nothing to what was already written. He began to apply the Law and the prophets in his personal rapport with his fellow countrymen.

The first question was to know what had changed with the arrival of Jesus. The provisional response is that Jesus wishes to lessen the gap between earth and heaven through obedience to the Law of Moses. The role of man has, in my opinion, become greater under the Covenant. We are invited to look around us and ask where are the gentle who will henceforth be placed at the centre.

In the Old Testament, Nehemiah was inspired by the same wish to prepare himself for the promises of God. For him a promise was both a personal invitation to react and to anticipate. For Nehemiah, this promise consisted in the restoration of the ramparts of Jerusalem. For us, it is, rather, a matter of the example of Jesus. The story of Nehemiah, however, teaches much about the Covenant between God and his people.

Remember the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah found himself in exile in Babylon. He asked permission from the King to return to his native land to restore the ramparts and the gates. Having gained this permission, he arrived in Jerusalem and started the building after a brief inspection. During the whole enterprise, Nehemiah never ceases to remind God of his promises that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. The covenant, for him, is an invitation to close collaboration with God. Nehemiah considers the labour of his hands as an acknowledgement of his prayer. For us also, the word of God and his promises are not just consolations, but also matters to stir us up.

At the instigation both of Nehemiah and of Jesus, the Reign of God calls us, a call as much to prayer and to biblical study as to its application.

I now ask your attention to the application of the Law in the parable of the pounds. The story is familiar to us but less well known than its counterpart in Matthew, the parable of the talents. I prefer the parable of the pounds to that of the talents. The parable of the talents is often interpreted as a plea to bring to fruition innate or acquired abilities. The parable of the pounds, as it takes for granted that everyone receives the same amount, is not compatible with this interpretation.

It is more likely that the pounds are the word of God or the Law and that the parable exhorts us to work in these areas. The generosity of the parable is that everybody is accepted if he has worked according to this generosity. The fact of having worked is more important than the result. I believe that it is in the spirit of the Bible if I add that through this generosity God renders us nimble in order that we might do more. I would like to return to the title of this study, the Kingdom of God.

The arrival of Jesus means the beginning of his Kingdom. The Kingdom means consolation for the childlike and for the poor in heart because in this Kingdom it is they who have the priority. It is an invitation to use our creative skills to bring into being Jesus' models in our every day lives. In the experience of every day, we have the assurance that God will conquer, but one also encounters doubt in equal measure. Has one allowed the pounds to bear fruit? Does one walk along a path founded on imitating Jesus? I believe that the grace of God enables us to walk on these two feet, on one hand the absolute victory of Jesus, and on the other, doubt about the right decisions made.