

The Coming of the Kingdom **Luke 17:20-37**

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and over the last few weeks we've heard Him tell a number of parables urging his listeners, then and now, not simply to live for this life, just using the resources God entrusts to us for now and for our own pleasure, but to use them with a view to the eternity that lies ahead. We also heard him say in Chapter 16 v16 that 'The Law and the Prophets were until John (the Baptist); since then the Kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.' And then last Sunday we watched as he healed ten lepers.

And hearing all this and seeing all this, Luke tells us in v20 that the Pharisees, who were the religious leaders, the religious elite of their day, asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come. Which is interesting on two counts. Firstly, they want to know about timing. When is the Messiah going to come and inaugurate the Kingdom? When is all the stuff that we want to see happen – God's kingdom coming on earth -going to happen? And what's interesting about that is that times don't change do they? When it comes to the second coming of Jesus very often people seem unable to think further than 'when' – and they get their charts and their time lines trying to work out the when and of course there have been some pretty high-profile cases, most recently Harold Camping but plenty of others before him, where people have come totally unstuck because they get obsessed with the when.

But besides wanting to know the timing, the Pharisees question is interesting because it presupposes the fact that the Kingdom has not yet come. 'When's it coming?' implies 'it isn't here yet Jesus, so when will it come?'

And in response Jesus talks first to the Pharisees, then to the disciples of the now and the not yet of the Kingdom of God.

Now and Not Yet

You see the Pharisees have heard Jesus teaching, they've witnessed the miracles, but they have missed what God is doing in and through Jesus. They had their preconceived ideas of what the Messiah would be like, and Jesus didn't bear any resemblance to that. They were watching and waiting for a Messiah who would retake Jerusalem, and throw out the Romans and set up the kingdom of God on the earth. And if the Jewish literature of the time is anything to go by they were expecting all this to be accompanied by signs in the heavens. And none of that is happening, so they ask Jesus, when's the kingdom of God going to come.

And in response Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed" (v20). It's not coming in the way you expected it to come, with a political, revolutionary, powerful Messiah, setting up his throne, overthrowing his enemies with signs in the heavens, so people can point at it and say, 'there's the Kingdom of God.' Instead Jesus says in v21, "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

In other words, in their looking for a political, powerful Messiah, these Pharisees have missed the fact that the Kingdom of God has already arrived, it's in the midst of them, because the kingdom has come with Jesus. The rule and the reign of God has arrived in the person of Jesus. It is coming in the lives of those who

turn to Him as we saw the Samaritan leper turn to Him last week. The Kingdom of God is now. His transforming power is active now. Forgiveness for sins is available now. People can enter the kingdom now, because Jesus has come. The kingdom is present – it is here in your midst; but it is also future.

You see in their looking for the dramatic, heavenly signs and the coming of the conquering King, the Pharisees missed the *arrival* of the Kingdom in Jesus. And what Jesus goes on to explain to His disciples is that those signs the Pharisees and just about everyone else in Judaism were looking for, were not the signs of the *arrival* of the Kingdom but of its *fulfillment*, of its final consummation, of the Kingdom coming in all its final power and glory on the last day.

Because whilst the Kingdom has arrived in Jesus, it isn't fully here now. Which is why we still struggle with sin and sickness and satan. It's why we still lose loved ones to cancer and car-crashes. It's why death still stalks us. We can know real victories over sin and sickness and suffering now – because the kingdom has come, it is now, the powers of the age to come can be tasted now, but it is not yet here in all its fullness. It is the now and the not-yet of the kingdom. And full victory over sin and sickness and satan will only be realized when the kingdom comes in all its fullness at the end of the ages when the King returns in glory.

And when that day comes, Jesus says, it will be obvious, it will be sudden and it will divide.

You won't miss it

Jesus says to His disciples in v22 that “The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man.” In the days and weeks and months and years ahead, the disciples are going to face times when they will long to see Jesus, the Son of Man, ruling in power, coming and putting wrong to right. Coming and establishing justice and righteousness on the earth. But they won't see it, others will, there will be a generation that sees it, but they won't. And haven't there been times when you've felt what these disciples felt? You look at the newspapers or watch the news and you see what's going on in the world. Or you're going through the mill in your own experiences either as a family or in your health, or you watch a friend struggling and falling in sin. And you long for the day when Jesus comes back and puts it all right: and your prayer is the same as Paul at the end of his letter to the struggling church at Corinth (1 Cor 16:22), and the same as John at the end of Revelation, imprisoned in exile on the Isle of Patmos, 'Come Lord Jesus!' (Rev 22:20).

But that longing for the day when Jesus returns, that desire to see God intervene and change the status quo can leave someone vulnerable to believing false claims. That the Kingdom has already come in all its fullness, that if you just go to this place, or that place, this conference or that revival, hear this speaker, get prayed for by that healer, you'll find the power you're looking for. And so Jesus says, v23, “And they will say to you, 'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them.”

Because, when the Kingdom comes in all its final, consummative power, it will be obvious. There will be no debate. There won't be any need to go hunting for it. No-one will be in any doubt. V24, "For as the lightening flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day."

In Jesus' first coming, people –like these Pharisees missed it. That won't happen second time round. As lightening flashes across the sky this isn't going to be hidden. You won't be able to miss it. But you can miss out on it.

You can miss out on it

By using the examples of Noah and the flood, and Lot and the destruction of Sodom, Jesus makes the point that when the end comes people will be living just as normal: eating and drinking, buying and selling, marrying and being given in marriage, planting and building. And all the time judgment and destruction are just around the corner. People will be going about everyday life, indifferent and unaware to what is approaching. As the apostle Paul says that day "will come like a thief in the night." (1 Thess 5:2), and people will be caught sleeping.

But then Jesus goes on to add what at first seems a perplexing comment, v31: 'On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back?'

Now, why would you? Why does Jesus feel the need to say, when judgment comes, when the day of the Son of Man comes, don't give any thought to your possessions? Why would anyone do that on the last day?

Why? Because that's how they've lived throughout their lives. When the day comes it won't change anything about our hearts, it will simply confirm what they were like all along. You see, there is nothing wrong with the stuff Jesus lists people will be doing when He comes: eating, drinking, planting, building, buying selling, marrying. None of those are in anyway sinful. But when they become your life, when work is your life, or marriage is your life, or what car you have is your life, or getting the latest thing is your life, or your boyfriend or girlfriend is your life, and that is what has your heart, you're leaving yourself open to trouble on the last day. Because if you choose these things over Jesus now, his coming again is not going to be joy for you. If dying is not gain to you, if Jesus is not more valuable to you than sex, or your boyfriend, or girlfriend, or your bonus, or whatever, His coming will be pain not gain for you.

In the parable of the soils and the sower Jesus says the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things are like weeds and thorns and thistles that can strangle the life of God out of you. It is possible to be so absorbed with the stuff of life, so taken up with the toys in the playground of life that you are totally unprepared for His return.

And that's the picture Jesus is painting here: of a young person, or a man or a woman who can't make up their mind, who can't decide which way to turn. The King is coming but they want to run back to get this other thing. And it's that

hesitation, that wavering that is so deadly, because it answers the question, 'do I love Jesus more than this?' Do I love Jesus and His glory more than this relationship, more than riches, more than this sin, more than this stuff? It's anything where you find yourself standing on the line and Jesus is over there and this other thing is over here and you can't decide which one you'll choose. And that wavering is deadly, Jesus says.

And in three sobering words Jesus brings it home, v32, 'Remember Lot's wife.' And that is to disciples – not Pharisees. It's to followers of Jesus, men and women like you and me: remember Lot's wife. Now, if you don't know the story, Lot is Abraham's nephew, and Lot and his family live in the city of Sodom, and they're warned that judgment is imminent and they need to escape. They are told to run for their lives and not to look back. But as destruction begins to rain down on Sodom Lot's wife looks back. Why?

Because she loved Sodom more than God. She loved Sodom more than righteousness. Sodom was her life and that's where her heart was – all that Sodom meant to her. And so she looked back. On the verge of being delivered, on the verge of being rescued from the judgment, she is overwhelmed in the judgment. And Jesus says, remember her. Learn from her. Don't have that kind of attitude to this life, or your possessions, or your relationships. Don't let them have that kind of a hold on you. Let God be the treasure and the pleasure of your life now, so you'll never look back on the last day. Have the kind of attitude that meant that Paul could say, "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain!" (Phil 1:21).

So Jesus says, v33, 'whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.' Lot's wife wants to keep her life, she doesn't want to lose Sodom, and in the process she loses her life. Paul is happy to lose anything for Jesus because he knows who his greatest treasure is and in the process he gains life.

So just consider how understanding and grasping that the Kingdom is going to come in all its final consummative power suddenly, will cause you to live in a state of heart readiness. Because living with that sense of the imminence of Jesus' return – that you and I could be going about life as normal - will affect your normal life, your viewing and surfing habits, your business dealings and work ethic, as well as how you handle your stuff. But it's also going to affect the way you treat others. In James 5:9, James says 'Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold the judge is standing at the door.' And understanding the Judge is at the door and can come in at any moment is going to influence how you think of and speak of and treat your wife, husband, parents, neighbours, colleagues.

But it's interesting isn't it, that Jesus says all this to the disciples, and not to the Pharisees? The Pharisees spark this teaching by their question, 'when it going to happen?' But Jesus only tells them the first bit about the Kingdom's arrival. This second part of the kingdom's fulfillment he tells to the disciples. You see, a failure to see and to welcome and to accept the arrival of the kingdom in Jesus, leaves you exposed and defenceless when the King comes with His kingdom in all its

finality. If you haven't welcomed Jesus in His first coming, in His humility and suffering, you won't be ready, in any sense, to welcome Him when He comes in glory. Because when the Kingdom comes, whilst you won't be able to miss it, you can miss out on it, because when it comes it will divide.

It will divide

V34-5, "I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left."

Now, whether the one is taken away and rescued from destruction or swept away in judgment, the point's the same. When Jesus is finally revealed and the kingdom comes in all its power, it will be a time of separation and division, and people who in this life are really close, who share the same bed or work at the same desk, or drink at the same bar, will find themselves on opposite sides of the judgment seat. Because in the final judgment it's not about who you know – it's not about your wife's or your parents' or your friend's faith, and that's why you're here - it's about where you stand personally. It's about you and your heart, and what you have done with Jesus. Just as it was with the Pharisees, it's about how you respond to the kingdom in the midst of us in Jesus, now. And so, although that final day is going to be truly global and obvious to everyone, it's also going to be very personal. And then it's not going to be what anyone else – wife, or parents, or friends think about Jesus that matters, but what you think.

But having heard Jesus talk about the visibility and the suddenness of the coming of the Kingdom, and having heard it's going to bring division, the disciples ask Jesus in v37: 'where, Lord?' And that question is a bit puzzling. After all Jesus has spoken about, why do they ask 'where?' Is it that they just haven't been following Jesus, and they've got a bit lost – like when I'm trying to hold a conversation in French, and I think I'm following, and the other person thinks I'm following and then I'll say something and it rapidly becomes obvious to him and me I've got completely the wrong end of the stick and haven't got a clue what we're talking about? Are they asking where Jesus will return? Or where the judged or the saved will be taken? Or where the judgment will take place?

Well, whatever they're asking Jesus' says, 'where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.' This time last year we were with the DuPlessis family in South Africa, and Johan acted as our guide as we drove around the game parks – and one of the things he would look for were the vultures circling. Because if they were circling in the air, something was going on on the ground beneath them. And in reply to the disciples Jesus is saying, look, you don't need to worry about 'where' – when the kingdom comes it will be obvious, it will be final, and judgment will be visible and universal. And if Jesus' use of vultures circling gives any taste of what lies ahead, while His return is going to mean salvation for some, for others, as one commentator (Bock) puts it, 'it will be a grim affair.'

You see, the Pharisees, and to some extent the disciples are looking for a glorious, flashy Messiah who is going to uproot the Romans and establish the kingdom on earth with great fanfare. Well, the kingdom of God will be

established in power, but first you have to decide what you will do with Jesus who comes humbly to suffer and to die. And instead of leaving the disciples with a picture of victory and triumph, he leaves them with this deeply sobering picture of judgment: of vultures eating the flesh of carcasses.

So, if the Kingdom is going to come in such a way that we can't miss it, but it is possible to miss out on it, and we see the division and the judgment it's going to bring – how can we end up on the right side of all this? How can you and I find ourselves as those who aren't vacillating between Jesus and possessions, between Jesus and a boyfriend, between Jesus and sex, between Jesus and hell?

Well, there's an answer in this passage, and it would be easy to miss it: v25, 'But first [before all these things take place] he [that's the Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.'

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and was tried and crucified, He wasn't suffering for His own sins, but for ours. And He wasn't just rejected by the Romans and the Jewish leaders. On the cross, as He became sin for us, He was rejected by God – that's why He cried out, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' And Jesus was rejected, that you and I might never have to experience it.

You see, in the end, Noah and Lot, these two men who were delivered from the judgment in their day, they weren't such great men. If you read their stories, you'll know that whilst they tried to live righteously, they failed like we all fail. They weren't saved because they were so good, they were saved because God is so graceful. And when they heard God's warning of coming judgment they believed it, and against the odds they trusted the message of God more than all the other messages they were hearing, and as a result they were saved.

And it's as we put our trust in Jesus and the way out offered by the cross, that we can find safety from coming wrath. And it's knowing that out of His love for you Jesus has paid the price and opened the way of life for you, now and forever, that will give you all the incentive you need to choose Him over everything else. Then you're not going to be like Lot's wife – looking back and falling in the judgment, rather, like Paul, you can say, 'for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.'