

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast. Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs. “For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.” I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the young plant come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.” (Isa 61:1-11 NIV)

“There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.” ... “Now this was John’s testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Christ.” They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’” Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, “Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” “I baptise with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.” (Joh 1:19-28 NIV)

The Secret Message of Jesus.

John had crowds go out to hear him preach, and many even received baptism. They were happy to hear John's message; to turn away from their broken lives and to turn their hearts towards God. They enjoyed John's message about the coming Messiah and the freedom and restoration He would bring. John prepared the way so that when Jesus started His ministry there was a readymade crowd for Him to teach.

John the Baptist taught about how we should live our lives and about Jesus restoring us to God. Jesus developed these same themes through His teachings, parables and stories, telling us how to live and about both the love and judgement of God our Father.

Jesus soon had huge crowds following Him, hanging on His every word and being amazed and blessed by His healing miracles. The crowds loved this teaching. This teaching is acceptable, even to modern-day sceptics and atheists. They all praise the outstandingly wise and moral teachings of Jesus which continue to form the bedrock of our moral and legal systems.

But there is more to Jesus' teaching than meets the eye. Jesus said a very strange thing to His disciples:

"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, 'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.'" (Luke 8:10).

There is a secret message in the Gospels that Jesus intentionally hid from the crowds because they could not

accept it, and it remains hidden to this day. The secret message of the kingdom is there for those who have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to receive it but for most it remains hidden. My prayer is that this morning God will grant us the grace to open our hearts to the secret message of the kingdom.

As I said, John the Baptist's message and what the gospels tell us about Jesus' healings and parables and teaching is generally acceptable, even if sometimes quite a challenge to live up to.

But we might notice from a careful reading of the Gospels, that Jesus was not particularly impressed with people that accepted this message and decided to follow Him:

“Many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.” (Jn 2:24)

Like these crowds we can rejoice that Jesus is our saviour and cheer Him on, but Jesus is not looking for fans or followers. He was not impressed by the crowds and did not entrust himself to them.

The Scribes were diligent in studying the scriptures and were devoted to understanding and teaching God's word. But Jesus said to them:

“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (Jn 5:39)

Like these scribes we can be devoted to bible reading and learning all about Jesus, but Jesus is clearly not impressed with our understanding of doctrine or our knowledge of the scriptures.

He sent the Pharisees away saying that in their enthusiasm for religion they made it hard for those seeking God to actually find Him.

“You must be careful to do everything [the religious leaders] tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” (Matt 23:1)

Like these Pharisees, we might be committed to church and faithful in our religious observance, but Jesus is not impressed with our devotion.

And then, to cap it all, Jesus says:

“Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you.’” (Matt 7:22)

Surely such people are the most committed believers Jesus could wish to have – even performing miracles in His name! What more can Jesus possibly want?

These are some of the uncomfortable sayings of Jesus which somehow never found their way into our liturgies. For those who have ears to hear, it should be evident that there is

more to Jesus Gospel than believing He is the Son of God and that He died to restore our relationship with God.

If belief in Jesus and following Christian practices is not enough to share in the Kingdom of God, then what is? What is the Secret of the Kingdom which Jesus hid from the crowds?

Thankfully the Gospels also give us the hidden teachings of Jesus, which He kept mostly to His disciples. John the Baptist did not know this secret, nor did the Old Testament writers. Many early Christians missed it and many Christians today have yet to discover this secret message, which I want to try and share with you today. It is most appropriate to consider this during Advent when we think about the incarnation of Jesus, because that is what this secret is about - the incarnation of Jesus.

The secret of the Kingdom is far more radical than a set of beliefs and religious practices. He shared it with Nicodemus:

"I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." (Jn 3:5-6)

There is nothing here about believing in Jesus or trying to be like Him. The secret of the Kingdom is far more radical – nothing short of starting again with a new life – God living in us brought about by the Spirit of God. Jesus incarnate in us.

It is an encounter with the living Jesus of such magnitude and significance, that Jesus describes it as being born again. It is not just a new belief but a new life – the life of Jesus

within us. It is Jesus incarnate in us! Jesus living in us and through us. Influencing our minds and behaviour, changing our values and priorities - indeed possessing us is not too strong a description. This is not meant to be a concept or metaphor but a reality.

The secret of the Kingdom is more vividly expressed later in John's gospel where Jesus says:

"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him." (Jn 6:53-56).

This is one of the most difficult and perplexing things that Jesus said. Only those with ears to hear can make any sense of or accept this truth. Not surprisingly, when Jesus said this we are told:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. (v 66).

What we read here is the hidden message of Jesus, the Secret of the Kingdom. Jesus is saying that we need to take His life into us. The picture is one of taking His life into our bodies; eating Him, so that His life becomes our life. Again Jesus is talking about being incarnate in us. Jesus living in us and through us.

Anyone can handle the idea of trying to emulate the loving acceptance of Jesus. Many believe that Jesus was God

incarnate and worship Him as God. But not so many are prepared to let Jesus take over their lives.

My faith and my relationship with God has changed massively in recent years. I used to be almost entirely taken up with the beliefs of our faith – Christian doctrine and teaching. I studied both old and new testaments extensively and have been teaching theology for thirty years. But I spent relatively little time in the Gospels – there's not much doctrine in the gospels. But a few years ago God said to me that it was time I got to know Jesus! And since then I have rarely strayed from the gospels in my personal reading and study. I have been confronted in the Gospels by the realisation that Jesus intends us to live as He did, in the power and presence of God. I have to confess that I rarely feel I have understood what I read. But I am not reading for understanding, but rather for encounter. I realise that I must eat His flesh and drink His blood. His life needs to become my life. And that needs to find expression both inwardly in the state of my own inner world – my thoughts and feelings, my confidence in God, being able to hear His voice and discern His will. And there is also the outward expression – which is equally hard, in changed behaviour, in courageous witness and bold prayer. Although since this change I have seen Jesus do amazing things, particularly in healing, I feel that I am only at the beginning of this adventure. But what a difference there has been since I have stopped trying to become more like Jesus, and instead begun to recognise His incarnation in me.

We all know what it means to try and be like someone. No doubt we have all at some time had our heroes that we tried to emulate – usually in the trivial outward ways of clothes and mannerisms. But most of us eventually grow out of it when we realise that we are the same people inside.

The secret message of the Kingdom is that we are not called to emulate Jesus, but to incarnate Him.

Jesus' incarnation in us is even more amazing than His incarnation in His fleshly body. He was born as a baby into poverty. But He was able to live a perfect life, fully expressing the grace and truth of God. He rose from the dead and is now worshipped by myriads of angels in blazing glory.

Jesus was willing to come in the most humiliating way in the most humiliating context. But to be incarnate in me? Jesus was rejected and crucified by sinful creatures like me. Yet He is prepared to clothe Himself in my flesh, and be represented in the world by my poor and reluctant witness.

He is willing to come to us in our spiritual and emotional and moral sickness and be incarnate in us. He is prepared to dwell in us in our weakness and disobedience, in our ignorance and unbelief. And He is prepared to have people mock Him in us, misunderstand Him in us, reject Him in us and be blind to Him in us.

Yet that is the Secret of the Kingdom – Jesus incarnate in Christian believers.