

Seek First the Kingdom of God – New Year Sermon 2014

Welcome: At start of the service

I want to begin by wishing you all a Happy New Year

- “May God fulfil his purposes in you this coming year”
- It is a time of fresh beginning and hope
- We make fresh plans
- We have New Year resolutions to live better,
- Be healthier, achieve something.

We are nearly at the end of the twelve days of Christmas

- Tomorrow is Epiphany *(Greek epiphaneia, manifestation)*
- Epiphany means a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something.
- Or a comprehension or perception of reality by a sudden intuitive realization:
- It is the day we traditionally celebrate the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi.
- In the Orthodox church it is the day they remember the baptism of Jesus

I feel this is particularly relevant this morning

- An epiphany is a moment in time when God reveals himself
- and we are changed forever
- It is a new start

At the same time this is the point in the year when disillusionment begins to set in

- The Christmas holidays are over
- We are preparing to return to the daily routine on Monday.
- The new school term starts, many of us will be back at work
- Our bank balances are empty and the credit card bills have come in.

I came across a few words in Ecclesiastes that seemed to sum this up for me

Readings: Ecclesiastes 11 (The Message - adapted)

Be generous: Invest in acts of charity. Charity yields high returns.

²Don't hoard your goods; spread them around.

Be a blessing to others. This could be your last night.

When the clouds are full of water, it pours with rain.
When the wind blows down a tree, it lies where it falls.
Don't sit there watching the wind. Do your own work.
Don't stare at the clouds. Get on with your life.

⁵ Just as you'll never understand the mystery of life forming in the womb,
So you'll never understand the mystery at work in all that God does.

⁶ Go to work in the morning and stick to it until evening without watching the clock.
You never know from moment to moment how your work will turn out in the end.

⁷⁻⁸ Oh, how sweet the light of day, And how wonderful to live in the sunshine!
Even if you live a long time, don't take a single day for granted.
Take delight in each light-filled hour, remembering that there will also be many dark days
and that most of what comes your way is fleeting.

⁹ You who are young, make the most of your youth. Relish your youthful vigour.
Follow the impulses of your heart. If something looks good to you, pursue it.
But know also that not just anything goes; you have to answer to God for every last bit of it.

¹⁰ Live life to the full — you won't be young forever.
Youth is fleeting, it will slip through your fingers like smoke.

Sermon: Seek First the Kingdom of God

Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them.

He said:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Preamble

This morning we are thinking about the motto text for 2014

- This is found in Matthew 6:33
- 'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness'
- And is part of Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount'

As you know there are four gospels

- Each emphasises a different characteristic of Jesus
- Mark describes Jesus as the servant
- Luke reveals him as a Man
- With Jesus regularly describing himself as the 'Son of Man'
- And His genealogy in Luke 3 traces him back to Adam
- Whereas John has Jesus as God
- *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" (John 1:1)

In Matthew, he is a Jew writing to the Jews

- Introducing Jesus as their coming King
- His genealogy traces him back to King David
- And it is in Matthew we find much of the teaching about the Kingdom of God,
- Or Kingdom of heaven

Matthew records this sermon at the beginning of Jesus' ministry

- It is almost like his manifesto
- The values and nature of his kingdom
- The sermon takes up 3 chapters in Matthew (5-7)
- It begins with the Beatitudes
- Which we have just read
- And ends with the wise man who builds his house on the rock

Incidentally, who does Jesus describe as a wise man?

- We read in chapter 7:24
- *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."*
- Hearing Jesus' words – and acting on them
- That's how to be wise
- It's not about being clever and knowing lots of things
- It is about hearing God speak and changing your life to what he says.

So the 'Sermon on the Mount' is life changing

- It is Jesus setting out the values of the Kingdom of God

- What its values are,
- Who we are and how we should live
- It contains some of the best known teaching of Jesus
 - the Lord's Prayer
 - *"You are the salt of the earth"*
 - *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brothers eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye"*
 - *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you".*
 - *"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."*

I would strongly recommend reading the Sermon on the Mount over the coming week

- Matthew 5-7
- It gives an insight into the nature and values of God's Kingdom.
- It well worthwhile
- And of course or motto text is *'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness'*

Next week Jenny will be sharing about what we should understand as the Kingdom Of God

- This morning I want to think more about the seeking
- How do we seek?
- How do we desire God's kingdom above everything else?

First let's read the passage in the Sermon on the Mount

Reading: Matthew 6:25-34 Do Not Worry

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Seek first the Kingdom of God

These are well known words

- Often we concentrate on the do not worry part
- Especially if you are like me and a bit of a worrier
- If I'm not worrying about what might go wrong in the future
- Then I'm worrying about what I might have done or said wrong in the past.

All of which is completely pointless

- As worrying cannot change the past or control the future
- But it can't half ruin the present.
- So what Jesus is saying here is

Make the most of your life and the opportunities you have

- We none of us know what the future holds, Good or Bad.
- But Don't worry, God knows what we need
- And worrying about it will not help anyway
- Instead 'Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness'

Some of you may have noticed we have only used the first part of the verse

- I feel that is right
- Because I think the whole meaning of the verse is not to focus on '*All the things that will be given to us as well.*'
- But to seek first the kingdom
- So it seemed appropriate to leave that part off the motto

In any case these things to be given us are not the world's wealth

- As we would understand it
- At best it is talking about necessities in life like food and clothing
- It certainly doesn't mean if we follow God we will be healthy and wealthy.

There are many Christians who have given everything to God's Kingdom

- And have received persecution and live in poverty because of their faith
- Jesus mentioned this in the beginning of his sermon in the beatitudes

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10)

Seeking after God's righteousness may mean loss in this world

- But gain in the kingdom of heaven.
- As I've said, next week, Jenny will be looking at what the kingdom of God is
- What it means
- Bit this morning I want to concentrate on how we seek this
- How in practice do we seek first God's Kingdom?
- How do we seek His righteousness?

I want to think about three ways we can seek first God's kingdom

1. Transforming our Allegiance
2. Transforming our Thinking
3. Transforming our Hearts

Transforming our Allegiance

This is about where we belong

- It is about our identity
- Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:9

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."
- Obviously he is talking to Christian believers here
- And he is not saying we should be like this
- He is saying we are

When we become Christian we gain citizenship in God's kingdom

- We have been chosen
- We are not here because we decided to come
- But because we responded to His call
- We are a royal priesthood – God's representatives or ambassadors in this world
- Whether good or bad ambassadors we still represent God in this world

We are God's special possession

- Do you know that?
- We all have special possessions

- Those with special memories and sentimental value
- God sees us as a special possession
- Of special value because his own beloved son died for us.

But like all citizens we have privileges and responsibilities

- Our responsibility is set down here
- *“That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”*
- Our first duty as citizens of God’s kingdom is praise and worship

So here is our first clue on how to seek first God’s kingdom

- Know yourself to be called as a citizen
- Be diligent in praising God
- How?
- Three ways
 1. Keep one day a week special for God
 - This world tells you Sunday is a family day
 - Which is good but not scriptural
 - Sunday is a God day
 2. Join with other believers in worship
 3. Honour God with your words and actions 7 days a week

Transforming our Thinking

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:2

Whereas the first point was about a change of identity

- This is about change in our culture
- This is really hard
- Our culture is ingrained in us as the norm
- So much so that we struggle to even see its effect on us.

We are created to be social beings

- To belong and participate in society
- So we subconsciously adapt to the group in which we are living
- Whether that be the country or area we come from

- Or the school, workplace or even church we attend
- They all have an unwritten culture and ethos

In addition to this we are influenced by the beliefs and attitudes of the telly we watch

- We cannot escape this
- Even if we joined a monastery to escape from the world
- We would find there was a monastic culture there.

So how do we transform our minds?

- I guess the simple answer is to immerse ourselves in Gods culture
- As found in the bible
- As described in the Beatitudes for example
- That really is setting out a new culture
- It begins by telling us that if we acknowledge our need and helplessness
- We will receive the Kingdom of Heaven
- *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (vs.3)*

I found it interesting to look at the context in which Pauls encouraging to transform our mind was set.

- In Romans 12:1 Paul tells us
- *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”*
- Then he goes on to talk about transforming our minds
- Followed by a reminder we are all one body
- And each part is valuable
- And we should use our gifts for the good of God’s people

So what does this tell us?

- Our minds are transformed by offering ourselves to God
- Humbly seeking to be holy and righteous in our attitudes and actions
- And living in loving community with God’s people.

Transforming our Hearts

So finally we come to transforming our hearts

- Paul tells the Colossian Christians (Colossians 3:1-4)

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you

died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

A lot of how we feel is based on where we look

- If we look at others we can become jealous and unsatisfied
- But if we look to God we should be grateful and joyful

While I was up in Scotland I came across Kathryn's nephew's psychology text book

- Rejoicing in the name 'Brilliant Positive Psychology'
- Unsurprisingly it was extolling the virtue of positive thinking to achieve our ambitions
- Despite that it had some quite interesting points
- There was one quote in particular caught my eye

It said

"Unhappiness is caused by desiring what we don't have. Religion, particularly eastern religions such as Buddhism, seek to relieve this by teaching us not to desire Western culture seeks to relieve this by trying to satisfy the desire."

I'm not convinced that is the root of all unhappiness

- I would suggest that is sin - But never mind

It was the bit about religion trying to relieve this by teaching us not to desire that got me

- There may be some truth in this for some eastern religions
- But I would deny it completely as far as Christianity is concerned
- Christianity does not teach us not to desire
- It teaches us to desire the right things
- Desire things that are fulfilling and wholesome and righteous

That surely is the essence of our motto

- Desire the Kingdom of God
- Desire righteousness
- And everything else will fall into place

Where I think we agree is that desire is seldom fulfilled

- The more we have the more we want
- So if we desire money, for example
- Then getting money makes us hungry for more money.
- If it's a big house then we always want a bigger house

- I could go on for every human indulgence
- But you know how it is - its human nature.

But what of Godly things

- Jesus tells us this is different in his Kingdom
- Again in the beatitudes (Matt 5:6)
- *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”*

Ultimately, however, transforming our hearts is what God does

- David cried out in repentance to God (Psalm 51:10-12)

*“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”*

Ultimately this is the answer

- The way to receive a transformed heart is to ask God
- To spend time with him
- And to ask the Holy Spirit to work in you.

I want to finish with a few more of Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount

- From Matthew 7:7-11

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Amen