

Feb 17, 2008

The Kingdom is here and now, The in-breaking Shalom of God is available to all

The message

Last year, I had the opportunity to spend some time sharing with you about the central message of the “good news” of Jesus Christ. This week I would like to continue provoking our thoughts in the same direction. Why? Because it’s so easy for us to settle for a watered down version of the message Christ has left us to live by... it’s easy to get caught in the trap of turning that message into a series of rituals or, conversely, losing a sense of its power.

Here it is in a nutshell (see Luke 4: 18-19):

- The Kingdom of God is here and now

Here’s another way of expressing his message:

- The Kingdom, the in-breaking Shalom of God, is available to everyone through me (Jesus Christ).

This paraphrase doesn’t sound so compelling to us...What would it have sounded like to an ordinary run of the mill inhabitant of Israel in Jesus’ time? Let’s take some time to ponder that this morning.

Let’s start by understanding the message, what is this Shalom Jesus is carrying with him? Most people of the day would have understood the concept; unfortunately, our language doesn’t render it in its full meaning. Let me flesh it out. To a person of the Shalom of God would have been understood as:

- The state of those living aligned with God’s agenda.
- The integration of Contentment, health, justice, liberation, freedom and hope
- The equipping of a person so they can cope with life’s suffering and sorrows while basking in the beauty and joys it brings.
- Comprehensive wellbeing and flourishing at every level of life: Socially, economically, spiritually and politically.

Why may this message have been so compelling or so dangerous for someone of his day?



Day to day life in Jesus' neighbourhood

If you were just hanging around in Jesus' neighbourhood, trying to carry on with life, you had a lot to deal with. Above and beyond eking out a living, you were confronted with a series of spiritual, social and political realities that made your life complicated:

You were under the rule of the Romans, carrying the complication of being under siege and the "good news" brought to you by Caesar. Their intent was to milk your country of its prosperity and exercise dominance over your society. They didn't meddle in your religion as long as it didn't challenge the authority of Caesar, but they were clearly the masters.

You were religiously tied to the temple and its rituals which were, in many cases, supporting classes of religious leaders, some with good intent, others driven by the same power as the Romans.

You were being tugged at by streams of thought as to the way to rid the country of Roman domination and re-establish the rule of God. The Pharisees wanted purity for one day from everyone in order to see the Kingdom come, the zealots believed in armed revolution, the Essenes cut themselves off, and the Herodians pacified the Romans.

The consistent messages received unless you were of the ruling class led you to be without much hope. You watched the daily effects of class segregation despite the intent of equality announced by the Torah. If you didn't have much, or were sick, or didn't have any children, it was probably of your own making. If you fell into the categories of the poor, the lame, the sick, the collaborators or the gentiles, you were to many a "virus". Your uncleanness was something that was contagious and at risk of contaminating others. If you happened to be a woman, at least you were better off being Jewish, you still had a lower social position.

Above and beyond this, you continue to hear buzzing about Messiahs appearing here and there, their followers convinced they were following the envoy of God who would bring Roman domination to an end and restore God's order to your nation.

Doesn't sound very hopeful does it...

Enter the message of Jesus

Imagine living in that context and deciding to go up a hillside to listen to a teacher who seems to be announcing a different message. You find a spot to sit and listen; you're there with Jews, gentiles, Pharisees, shepherds... and the voice of Jesus drifts in with his message: (see Matthew 5: 1-11)

You are blessed... God blesses you. If you are poor, if you are mourning, if you are humble and unassuming, if you are thirsting for justice, if you are merciful etc... If this is the place at which you find yourself...God blesses you.



Jesus wasn't describing a list of states to attain but was describing the places in which they found themselves. The message he was giving was so different from anything anyone had spoken so far. His message was that God was breaking in with his Shalom and bringing to all, not just the elite of the ceremonially pure but to all.

Jesus caps it off by feeding people, you don't know exactly where the food is coming from but the miraculous thing is in feeding you and others, he hasn't demanded the ceremonial washing and Jews, gentiles, Pharisees and prostitutes are invited to reach into the same baskets to get food. The very feeding flies in the face of rituals and communicates how serious he is about his message. He teaches things that make your head spin...how to deal with people who bring you to court, how to deal with the oppressor. You find yourself laughing, amazed at the brilliance of his teaching.

As time wears on, you hear of the healings he performs, he is master over sickness and death. He heals the lepers and eats with the tax collectors. He lets his feet be washed by prostitutes and admonishes his host for his lack of hospitality instead of pushing her away. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS HERE!

Hope soars, God is reversing the order and breaking into the lives of the oppressed, the poor, the castaways, those thirsting for justice, the hurting, the wounded... IT'S HERE FOR ALL.

The hype builds over time to the point in which Jesus is heralded into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey by crowds screaming Hosanna. You're convinced, he is the Messiah.

The dashing of hope

When the religious leaders felt threatened enough, they had to find a way to shut him up. Everything they tried had failed: arguing with Him left them high and dry; accusing him of being a pawn of Satan didn't hold water with the miracles and healings. The only option to deal with a so called messiah was to have him put to death. His death would prove to the masses that he was just another failed messiah. He would be washed from the memory of people and order would be restored.

The religious leaders trumped up charges to force the hand of Romans, under Roman law; he could only be crucified if he had rebelled against the rule of Rome. They decided to twist his teaching to get the conviction for treason against Rome and be put to death.

When you hear of the trial, you run to the seat of Roman justice, you watch him dragged away to be flogged. You see him crowned with thorns, mocked and ridiculed then sentenced to die on a cross as so many other so called messiahs and rebels before him. He doesn't resist, if anything, he is quiet.

He carries his cross to the place of crucifixion, sapped of strength; one of your countrymen is recruited to help. You watch as they drive nails through the hands and feet of your messiah. He hangs between two other rebels and dies. You stand there with others, in disbelief that the person who had raised so many hopes is now hanging limp and broken on a cross. As the clouds gather and the rain begins, startled by an earthquake, you hurry back to your home wondering why you were such a fool... How



could that person have raised such hopes in you, made you feel like you had a place in God's plan. Later, you hear his body was taken to a grave guarded by soldiers so none of his fanatical followers would steal the corpse.



Hope breaks out

There is a rumble going through town like wildfire, Jesus is alive and appeared to women on Sunday morning, as the days go on, you hear has appeared to more and more people. Then it dawns on you...Jesus had lived out his message by taking on the religious, social and political order, being killed by them, making himself totally vulnerable and they still couldn't win. He had turned the other cheek, submitted to death and now had been vindicated by God himself. He was victorious over death. The Kingdom of God is here and now.

You rush out to find his disciples, as you arrive, you hear Peter speaking to the crowd, retelling the call of the Kingdom. With them, you recognized that Jesus is the way and decide then and there that your life could never be same again; you had tasted life and thirsted for more. His words were life to you. You are free, loved by God and called to join him in carrying this message of freedom to all who will hear.

What about today?

- Think about it, if Jesus had appeared on the scene today rather than 2000 years ago, who would the players have been?
- Who would be playing the role of the religious elite, ingrown, protective, and exclusionary?
- Who or what would be playing the role of Rome? Dominant, demanding time and allegiance?
- Who would Jesus be hanging out with? Who would the alienated, disposed, oppressed, hungry and hurting people be?
- What would he be challenging us with as he spoke about the Kingdom, the in-breaking Shalom of God?

