

# The Church & The Kingdom

Mark 4:26-34

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People around the world are mourning the death of Queen Elizabeth II. She reigned as British monarch for 70 years until her passing last week at age 96.<sup>1</sup> She lived and led through times of great change. She was a friend of pastors Billy Graham and John Stott—herself a lifelong Christian.

In reading about her death, I came across a debate about the ongoing role of the British monarchy. One writer asked, *is the British Monarchy a relic or relevant?* Over the centuries, the role of the British monarch has evolved from absolute power to a ceremonial head of state. Millions still love the royal family and tune into their weddings and coronations with awe. But, according to many commentators, the monarchy is now a matter of ceremony, symbolism, and nostalgia—there's no real power.

This notion of a kingship or kingdom in name only, without real power, made me think of criticism leveled at Jesus. The theme of kingship pervades Jesus' ministry.<sup>2</sup> His first public words, as recorded by Mark, find him coming into Galilee preaching, "the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Jesus taught that, in him, the Kingdom of God was arriving on earth. But for many observers in the first century, there was confusion and doubt as to the actual reality, or power, of this so-called Kingdom. Questions came from all sides.

Midway through Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist sent a delegation to him, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3). At his trial, the Roman governor Pilate—a man torn between curiosity and cynicism—asks Jesus, "Are you a King?" (John 18:37). The scribes and Pharisees, mockingly shout at Jesus on the cross, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:31-32). Even after his resurrection, Jesus' disciples are confused about the nature of his Kingdom, asking, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).<sup>3</sup>

Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God—a Kingdom that carried with it certain expectations. But instead of conquering Rome, Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross. Instead of liberating Israel from her oppressors, within a few decades of Jesus' life, Rome would burn Israel's Temple to the ground.

And yet, people kept calling Jesus *Christos*, or *Christ*, which means *anointed one*, which means, *King*. People insisted that, in Jesus, God's Kingdom had arrived on earth.

Many people now, as then, look upon this Kingdom with skepticism. They watch the grand traditions of the church, as it sings of "crowning Jesus with many crowns," and feel this Kingdom amounts to nothing more than ceremony, symbolism, nostalgia—there's no real power. Even for Christians, in our own lives, we can wonder about the power of the King. We look at the world around us, we look at issues in our own lives, and we wonder—quietly, privately—, "*if you are the King, why don't you come down and help? If the Kingdom of God is here, why can't I see it, touch it?*"

Questions about Jesus' Kingdom started during his own ministry. Today, we'll turn to him addressing these in Mark 4. First, we will note two things about the Kingdom of God according to Jesus: (1) The Kingdom's Mystery; and (2) The Kingdom's Power. We'll then turn from Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom, to Jesus' ascension and ongoing reign. We'll ask how Jesus is ruling his Kingdom now. This will take us into the question of the Kingdom's relationship to the church—and we'll see how (3) the church represents the Kingdom in a particular way. If an outline is helpful for you, we'll consider the *Mystery, Power, and Embassy*, of the Kingdom of God according to Jesus.

## I. The Kingdom's Mystery

In Mark 4 Jesus associates the Kingdom of God with secrecy. He says to his close followers, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables" (4:11). The term secret could be translated as "mystery," which in biblical usage means that the Kingdom is something that cannot be understood or entered by human reason or power—but it must be disclosed to us, by God.

Through his presence and teaching, Jesus is slowly disclosing the mystery of the Kingdom to those committed to him. He uses many parables to do so. These parables function as similes, metaphors, and analogies about aspects of the Kingdom, and their simplicity and vividness are meant to explain to the disciples what the Kingdom is like. Notice how Jesus begins the parable about the hidden seed and the mustard seed, in verses 26-32:

"The kingdom of God is as *if...*" (4:26); "With what can we *compare* the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it" (4:30).

A point to notice here is this: The Kingdom of God requires so much explanation because it does not meet our expectations. The language of “Kingdom” carried certain expectations for Jesus’ first hearers. As the crowds shouted when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Passover week, the Kingdom of God meant “the kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:10).<sup>4</sup>

In the centuries leading up to Jesus’ ministry, the kingdom of Israel faced various forms of collapse. In varying degrees, Israelites had been ruled by Persia, Greece, and now Rome. Israel’s prophets foretold a time when God would send a mighty king to reestablish the throne of David, defeating Israel’s enemies and inaugurating a perpetual kingdom of peace and prosperity.

For many, expectations of the Kingdom involved a military uprising, a decisive defeat of Rome, and the glorious reestablishment of David’s geo-political kingdom. The Kingdom would be something you could see and touch. It would advance by the sword, in glorious sight, and culminate in a decisive and final victory of Israel’s enemies.

But Jesus uses three parables about farming to counter these expectations. Likening the sowing of seeds to the sharing of the Word, he unfolds something of the mystery of the Kingdom in three ways.

- **The parable of the different soils** (4:1-9) explains the mystery of the Kingdom’s advance: not by the wielding of the sword but by the receiving of the Word.
- **The parable of the hidden seed** (4:26-29) explains the mystery of the Kingdom’s hiddenness: the Kingdom is not something unfolding in glorious sight; but more often it’s hidden, secret, working in ways imperceptible to human eyes.
- **The parable of the mustard seed** (4:30-32) explains the mystery of the Kingdom’s growth: it doesn’t begin with a decisive and great defeat of Rome; rather, it begins as something small, even pathetically insignificant. But it grows into something great.

There is a mystery to the Kingdom of God. It is *God’s* Kingdom, not man’s; and it works according to God’s mysterious but profound ways. Its arrival did not meet Jesus’ first hearer’s expectations; and the

Kingdom does not bow to our modern expectations, either. It is God's Kingdom and works in God's ways.

However—and with this, we turn to our second point—, while the Kingdom doesn't meet immediate expectations, that doesn't mean it's not real, present, or powerful. We'll now unpack two of these parables about the seeds and consider something of the Kingdom's Power.

## II. The Kingdom's Powerful Presence

Both the parable of the hidden seed, (4:26-29) and the parable of the mustard seed, (4:30-32), stress that the Kingdom really is *present*. And not only present, but that the Kingdom has a peculiar and striking *power*. From these two parables, consider two ways the Kingdom is present and powerful.

### 1. Powerfully Present in Jesus

It should not go unnoticed that there is a *person* announcing the Kingdom, who likens his own words to seeds of the Kingdom. In 4:14 Jesus tells us “the sower sows the word (τὸν λόγον).” We can infer this explanation holds true for the parables of the hidden seed (4:26-29) and mustard seed (4:30-32). The seed is the Word, and the Word is a key agent in the Kingdom. Now notice how Mark summarizes Jesus' teaching from 4:1-32, in v. 33: “With many such parables he spoke *the word* to them” (4:33). Mark does not say, “Jesus spoke to them”; or that “Jesus spoke a word”; Mark says Jesus spoke *The Word* (τὸν λόγον), which is the exact phrase Jesus used in 4:14 to define the sowing of the seed.

Jesus *is* the presence of the Kingdom. His person, his power, his word, are the reign of God entering into the world. In this sense, we should think of the present power of the Kingdom, not like a geo-political territory you could mark out. Rather, we should think of it as the arrival of a *king*, a *personal king*, who through his presence and word in our lives, begins to make the reign of God palpable.<sup>5</sup>

You might think of a person in total bondage: they're locked away in prison for crimes, and they are angry and bitter inside. However, they come to faith in Jesus through a prison Bible study, and Jesus melts their heart. Slowly, through Jesus, they let go of bitterness, pride, and even regret. They come to know a deep inner peace and increasing liberation from sins that once dominated them. They have come into the Kingdom of God—not because of an external, geo-political kingdom, but because of the presence of Jesus.

## 2. Powerfully Present in the Heart

A second way the Kingdom is powerfully present follows immediately from this example of Jesus' liberating presence. The Kingdom is powerfully present in the human heart. The territory the Kingdom of God is currently conquering is the human heart. This is why Jesus explains the entrance into the Kingdom as he does at the beginning of Mark:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe** in the gospel (Mark 1:15).

Repentance and belief (faith) are not external things that happen outside of people. They are personal acts of the heart, of the soul.

- **Repentance** is the heart humbly wilting before the holiness of God Almighty.
- **Belief (faith)** is the heart joyfully accepting the forgiveness and love of God, extended in the person of Jesus.

If the Kingdom of God has a territory, it's the human heart. If the Kingdom of God has a flag, it's the cross of Jesus Christ, planted in the human heart. And this flag is currently flying in billions of hearts, spanning every continent, crossing all ethnic and socio-economic divides. Because Jesus *reigns*.

These two parables say more about the *dynamics* of how the Kingdom grows: that its growth is often imperceptible, and it often begins in pathetic insignificance. We'll return to the significance of these truths below when we ask how we engage Kingdom work ourselves.

*Does the Kingdom have any real power?* Jesus is presently coming to people, in Spirit and Word, and in billions of cases, the most unconquerable patch of the planet—the human heart—is being conquered by his love.

However, at this point, this could all be seen as a relatively private Kingdom, something relegated to our private, spiritual lives. I want to ask now: *Where does the Kingdom show up in the concrete world? How is Jesus exercising his reign in the world here and now, in a way that others can perceive?* This takes us to our third point: The Kingdom's Embassy.

### III. The Kingdom's Embassy

Consider with me the movement from Jesus' earthly ministry to the period that followed it—the period when Jesus has resurrected, ascended to heaven, and from heaven is reigning. The opening of Acts gives us a window into the dynamics of this movement in God's plan.

In the opening of Acts, Jesus is speaking with his disciples just prior to his ascension, his return to heaven. Notice how the disciples ask about the Kingdom—still expecting it to show up in some geopolitical form. And notice how Jesus responds:

When they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight (Acts 1:6-9).

They're still looking for a concrete Kingdom. Instead, Jesus gives them a commissioning and promises an empowering truth: disciples will be witnesses to Jesus to the ends of the earth.

*Next in Acts do we see people go off to do their individual ministries? Do we see solo Christians? No.*

The next thing that happens in Acts is the birth of the church. Acts recounts how, over the next few decades, the Kingdom of God "showed up" in various parts of the world through the birth of little communities of Christians who gathered together around their new King. These communities were tangible, you could touch them, see them—here was the Kingdom of God, in plain sight.

Therefore, to conclude our time, I want to speak to us as a local church—The Falls Church Anglican—and leave us with a few ways the Kingdom of God is at work in and through the local church.

***How does the reign of Jesus show up in the local church?***

## 1. The Church is the Kingdom's Embassy

Kingdoms and nations have ways of marking out their citizens—things like passports and birth certificates. In some countries, there are ceremonies where new citizens swear an oath of allegiance before representative leaders. In Jesus' day, Israel marked out its citizens through things like circumcision and obedience to the law of God, including at that time many dietary habits.

*Does Jesus have a way of marking out citizens of his Father's Kingdom today—a way that's tangible in time and space? He does.*

Through baptism, the church marks out someone as God's son or daughter—this person is a citizen of God's Kingdom, even while being a citizen of Zimbabwe, or Germany, or America. Through the Lord's Supper, a church community shares in a meal demonstrating familial bonds. Even while attached to nuclear families, the Communion Meal says Christians are attached to the family of God, which belongs to God's Kingdom. Through the preaching of the Word of God, the church extends God's authority over His people; through the preaching of the Word, God tends, guides, and calls His sheep.

Just as an embassy represents its home kingdom or nation within a foreign land, so too, the church community exists as the Kingdom of God's embassy. Through its sacraments, the preaching of the Word, and its quality of life together, the reign of God is "showing up" on earth—every Lord's Day, you can see it, touch it.

*How about you? Is your citizenship in God's Kingdom clear to you? Is it clear to others? Does it "show up" in the life of the Kingdom's embassy here in this foreign land?<sup>6</sup>*

## 2. The Kingdom's Embassy Previews Kingdom Life

Second, the church gathers a people who *preview*—model—for the world what life in the Kingdom is like. This is why the Christian's call to love one another is so crucial. Jesus says to us, "all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

The quality of our life together displays the quality of the Kingdom of God. We are a community marked by *diakonia*—service. If a church community administers the sacraments and reads the scriptures but doesn't then love one another—it is like a basketball player hitting five three-pointers in one quarter, but all in the wrong basket. The quality of our life together is meant to *preview* the Kingdom to come.

### 3. The Kingdom's Embassy Forms Kingdom Ambassadors

The Kingdom's embassy, the local church, forms Kingdom ambassadors through *teaching* and *training*. *What do these ambassadors look like?* Many qualities mark them, but I'll suggest two that are essential:

**Physical and Spiritual:** The church shapes ambassadors who don't lose sight of the spiritual needs lying behind our world's physical woes.

- If Kingdom ambassadors seek to alleviate poverty, it is not merely because they long to see people's physical needs met, but because they long to see people fed by the bread of heaven—to eventually know the prosperity that is life with God.
- If Kingdom ambassadors work for social reconciliation, it is not just for harmonious neighborhoods. It is because they eventually long to see people reconciled to God.
- If Kingdom ambassadors labor for justice for others, they do not forget that each woman and man need justification before God.

Kingdom ambassadors care deeply about the tangible needs around them—but they cannot secularize the mission of God because they see the *whole person*. They see the glowing soul of the one made in the image of God and long to see that soul find its maker. The local church is that constant reminder to Kingdom ambassadors of these deep, spiritual realities.

The local church prepares Kingdom Ambassadors to work according to the wisdom of the parables of the seeds.

- **God gives the growth:** The farmer sows the seed. He sleeps and rises. Day and night go by. And the seed grows—and (4:27), "he knows not how."
- **We work, but we don't control or determine the outcome:** The point of this parable is that although Kingdom ambassadors have a job to do, we do not have control of what grows and how it grows—we cannot make the decisive thing happen. We till, we sow, we water; but God gives the growth. In whatever endeavors, prayers, witnessing, or hoping you have



for the Kingdom of God (in your life or the life of loved ones), rest in this fact: God gives the growth.

- **Go Small:** In the parable of the mustard seed, the point is clear: the Kingdom of God has small and insignificant beginnings. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he had little more than a hundred followers. Yet, that mustard seed of a movement swept across the world, transforming millions of lives, and changing the course of history. Don't miss God's small ways because you're only looking for the big and powerful. God likes to use the weak, insignificant, small things—to bring about amazing Kingdom growth.

People question Jesus' Kingdom, and Jesus' Kingdom people: it's all ceremony, symbolism, nostalgia—there's no real power. But Jesus continues to smile at this, unthreatened by the kingdoms of men, that have no ultimate scheme to defeat the spread of God's reign—which is making its way through the world, one heart at a time.

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## Endnotes

1. Queen Elizabeth II reigned from February 1952 until her death on September 8, 2022.
2. As James Dunn puts it, *Jesus Remembered*, pg. 383, "The kingdom of God was central to Jesus' preaching—this is beyond dispute."
3. See also the comment of the two men on the road to Emmaus, "We had hoped that he [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21).
4. From roughly 1000 BC to 586 DC Israel was a geo-political territory ruled by native kings in the line of David. The kingdom meant security from enemies, and peace and prosperity for the kingdom's inhabitants. The kingdom was something you could see and touch.
5. The seed, Jesus explains in Mark 4:14, represents the word of God ("The sower sows the word," 4:14). Growth, Jesus explains in 4:20, represents the miracle of personal faith and the ensuing maturation into fruitful discipleship ("Those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit" 4:20). So here is a kingdom that advances, not by the sword, but by the Word. And here is a kingdom marked, not by ethnicity, but by heart transformation.

6. The New Testament says Christians are “exiles” and that “our citizenship is in heaven” (1 Peter 1:1; Philippians 3:20). Therefore, it’s crucial we recognize the local church as the place where our true citizenship is recognized and reinforced.