

Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

The Kingdom of God is at Hand

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?" These words from Isaiah remind me that, since the first Sunday in Advent, the readings have heralded the coming of the kingdom of God. For the past few weeks the gospel has been slowly unfolding the story of Jesus according to Mark and Jesus' very first words in the Gospel of Mark are "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." The time is fulfilled - Jesus is here. The kingdom of God is at hand - Jesus has come. Jesus has been sent to spread the good news of the kingdom of God. He says to his disciples, "Let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out." Jesus wants everyone to know the good news of God - the kingdom of God is here.

We're still in the first chapter of Mark and, already, it's been chalk full of signs of the kingdom of God. Jesus is going about preaching and healing left, right, and centre. He's casting out demon after demon, his fame is spreading throughout Galilee, and people are flocking to him. They're hanging on his every word, believing his every word because he is teaching with authority - the true authority that comes from God. And he isn't just talking - he's healing, he's destroying evil. He's the

Son of God. The people are in awe. They're seeing right before their very eyes...the kingdom of God is here. They're hearing Jesus tell them how wonderful God is...words that we heard in this morning's psalm:

"The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

The LORD lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground."

The people aren't just hearing that God is great - they're seeing it in action. Jesus is pulling the people in to him...into the kingdom of God.

So, what happened? Did the kingdom of God leave when Jesus left the earth? I believe that God still does miracles in our world but not every lame person is made to walk. Not every blind person is made to see. Not every sick person is made well. To understand what's going on we need to take a closer look at the healing that Jesus is doing that heralds God's kingdom.

In those days, people who had something wrong with them were shunned by the rest of the people. They were outcasts, unwelcome in society. This was partly because the other people thought that these deformed or unwell people must've done something really bad for God to have blinded them or given them a disease. And if you touched one of these people, or even touched something that they'd touched, well then, you were unclean as well and had to undergo a cleanliness ritual. When Jesus healed these people he allowed them to become part of society again. They were no longer shunned and despised, they were welcomed back into their families, into their town. Jesus made them a part of the community again.

When Jesus went in to Simon Peter's sick mother-in-law, the first thing he did was take her hand. Mark doesn't say Jesus healed her. No, no, no...he says Jesus took her hand and the fever left her. Jesus took her hand to show to the other people that she was not unclean just because she was sick. She was not to be avoided and discarded because she was sick. And when she is made well, she gets up and does her normal day-to-day activities. She slips right back into her place in that family, in society. People were being welcomed back into the community again. That was a sign of the kingdom of God.

So did the kingdom of God leave the world when Jesus ascended into heaven? Absolutely not. We see a sign of the kingdom of God when a lame person is given a crutch and helped to walk. We see a sign of the kingdom of God when a deaf person is communicated with through sign language; when a homeless person is given a place to stay, when a downtrodden friend is given a listening ear...Every time eyes are opened to goodness and every time feet are turned onto the path of rightness, God's love is set loose on the world and we see a sign of His kingdom. Most importantly to keep in mind, it is not simply about being nice and doing good things for others. Jesus brought people back into community, he loved them, he invited them into the kingdom. Just as Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom but lived it and embodied it so do we as Christ's body on earth. The signs of the kingdom surround us. And when we see these things, we know God's kingdom is at hand. The signs of the kingdom surround us and when we do these things, we are signs of the kingdom of God. The signs of the kingdom surround us. When we live the kingdom life we reveal that kingdom to others and we are a foretaste of the perfect kingdom to come.

Let us proclaim the message to everyone who is searching. The kingdom of God is at hand.