

The Kingdom of Heaven

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim,
"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven
has come near."
Matthew 4:17*

The above verse sets out his core message at the onset of Jesus' ministry.

I must confess that for many years I have hardly paid any attention to it. Or, I have heard it as:

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim,
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That is, I haven't heard and taken seriously the "Kingdom" language Jesus uses.

And frankly, the inattentive listening on my part has missed the sharp edge of what Jesus was proclaiming. Has missed what those who followed him heard loud and clear. Has missed just what it was about Jesus that was so exciting to some and so threatening to others.

Let's begin hearing Jesus' proclamation afresh by thinking about what it means to live as a citizen of Canada (or whatever country one lives in).

Here in Canada we have established all kinds of spoken and unspoken rules for how to behave:

- What languages are "official"
- What clothing is OK for work, for public, for home
- What foods are healthy and nutritious
- How to be polite to strangers, friends, family
- How to be a good citizen
- Etc., etc.

We are often most keenly aware of these expectations when others from different countries come to our country with different habits and customs. Not all countries are alike!

When people think about moving permanently from one country to another, they usually try to prepare by finding out what are the habits and customs of the other country; and if possible, practice them before moving: studying maps; learning the language; studying the weather and thinking about clothing and shelter; trying new recipes; imagining living with a new set of laws / taxes / voting; etc. Thinking about how to be a good citizen of the new country; and particularly thinking about not getting into trouble by inadvertently breaking the law or making social gaffes.

In effect, when Jesus says, "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near," he is saying:

Hey everybody, pay attention.
Get ready. We're moving to a new country.
So start studying and learning what the new country will be like.
And start practicing right now how we will be expected to behave in the
new country.
Oh. By the way. The new "country" is Heaven.

And. Ready or not; like it or not; it is on the way. It is where we all are going. There will be consequences.

From this point on, we can just about understand everything that Jesus says and does as teaching us about how the Kingdom of Heaven is different than the Kingdom of his day (and of ours), and what we must do **NOW** in order to be ready when the time comes to move.

In Matthew, there are about 30 times where Jesus explicitly refers to the Kingdom of Heaven.

I found it helpful to quickly scan through a summary of these passages because it gives a good overall grasp of what Jesus is getting at:

1. Matt 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven
2. Matt 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven
3. Matt 5:19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments (of Moses and the prophets), and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.
4. Matt 5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.
5. Matt 6:10 Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, you will be done as it is in heaven.
6. Matt 7:21 Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in Heaven.
7. Matt 8:11 When Jesus heard (the Roman Army officer), he was amazed (at the officer's faith in him). I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven.
8. Matt 10:7 (The mission of the twelve disciples) As you go, proclaim the good news, "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near."
9. Matt 11:11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.
10. Matt 13:11 (The disciples ask Jesus why he uses parables.) He answered, "to you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given."
11. Matt 13:24 The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to someone sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.
12. Matt 13:31 The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree.
13. Matt 13:31 The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.
14. Matt 13:44 The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

15. Matt 13:45 The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.
16. Matt 13:47 The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.
17. Matt 13:52 (Jesus) said to (his disciples), "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the master of household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.
18. Matt 16:19 I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
19. Matt 18:3 Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.
20. Matt 18:4 Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.
21. Matt 18:23 The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. (The parable of the unforgiving servant)
22. Matt 19:14 but Jesus said, "let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs."
23. Matt 19:23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."
24. Matt 20:1 For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. (Parable of equal pay for unequal hours worked.)
25. Matt 22:2 The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. (Parable of the invited guests who would not attend.)
26. Matt 23:13 But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the Kingdom of Heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.
27. Matt 25:1 Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. (Parable of the 5 with extra oil.)

Our calling then as a congregation is to be like an emigration preparation group. We study the words and deeds of Jesus to learn from him about the customs and habits - behaviours and attitudes - of the Kingdom of Heaven which is at hand, and to which we are all headed. And then we practice them together. Together, we seek to be a foretaste here on earth of the Heaven at hand.

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