

**THE MESSAGE OF JESUS
AND HIS KINGDOM**
The truth that could change everything



Part 10 'Jesus the Crossroads'

Matthew 6:19 – 7:29

6th December 2009

What a great climax this baptism service is for our series on the message of Jesus and his kingdom. Over the last few months we have listened to Jesus speak, particularly through his parables. We have watched Jesus perform signs and wonders. We have even tried to imagine ourselves having a private conversation with him. Maybe I am the only one. But I have certainly glimpsed in a completely fresh way the beauty and wonder of Jesus' message. So what happens when you start believing Jesus is right and you want to sign on? Jesus and his grand vision of the kingdom have captured your heart. You want to be part of God's dream for our world. The message is getting into you and now you want to get into it. So how do you move from where you are to where you want to be? How do you move from the old kingdom of egotism, hedonism, consumerism and every other *-ism* to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of life and light? There are several moves we must make.

The first move is to rethink the whole of your life in the light of this message about the kingdom. This profound *rethinking* is what the Bible means by the word **repent**. Jesus said, '*All who have ears to hear, let them hear.*' This means hearing from your heart and thinking deeply about what you hear. It means looking at every aspect of your life in this new light – from the way you think about God to the way you treat your spouse, from your political allegiance to the way you spend your money. It doesn't mean everything changes at once but you are open to the possibility that everything may change over time. You sense you may be wrong about lots of things and you have a desire to re-orientate your life around what is good and true.

I remember at the age of 17 realising that I was facing the wrong way, living for the wrong reasons and trusting in my own goodness. In my college room that night I prayed a prayer of repentance, of rethinking my life and turning around. I can still remember feeling jealous of my friend who had taken that step as a youngster and had already been enjoying this new life for a few years. But repentance isn't a moment. It is a way of life, a permanent attitude. You've been wrong before and you know you can be wrong again. So you stay humble ready to be shown a new way.

The second move is the move of **faith**, of believing, of trusting. Believing flows so naturally from repenting that it is difficult to tell where one stops and the other starts. Once you are in that place where you begin to doubt yourself, you are much more ready to start trusting God. Once you realise that God can rescue you, it is a lot easier to recognise that you do need rescuing.

When the New Testament speaks about faith it is not simply believing this or that *about* God. It is believing *in* God. In the same way that I might say, 'I believe in my wife', it expresses a confidence in the character and actions of the other that forms the foundation of the relationship. This move of faith is also not simply believing this or that about the good news of the kingdom. It is believing in and having confidence in the good news of the kingdom.

Are you one of those reflective types who sometimes doubts your own existence never minds God's? Are you haunted by questions like – How much must I believe? – Am I disqualified if I have X number of doubts? Be reassured, Jesus constantly dealt with these concerns. On one occasion he reassuringly said that it takes faith the size of a mustard seed - which is really small. But still how do you measure faith? Jesus answered that as well. If you say you believe in his message, but you do not seek to practice it, your faith is a matter of words only. It's not substantial, not real. Faith that counts, then, is not the absence of doubt; it's the presence of action. Real faith propels you into action. The apostle Paul put it very clearly in Galatians 5:6 **For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, it makes no difference to God whether we are circumcised or not circumcised the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.** You sometimes hear people talk about a *leap of faith* in the sense of a leap *into* faith. But it is really a leap you take because you are already in faith and want to put you faith into loving action. So this Christmas we are trusting there will be lots of leaps of faith as we go out into the community and express our faith in loving action. The little boy who leaps from the stairs into his daddy's arms wouldn't leap unless he were in a sense already securely in those arms in his imagination. Once he has made the jump in his imagination – that's the faith – the actual leap is pure, exhilarating joy.

The third move grows out of repenting (rethinking) and believing (faith). If you repent and believe you must stay open to receive. This **receptivity** is hard to define. It is not exactly active nor is it passive. It is the quality we see in Mary, the mother of Jesus. In the Christmas story which we are about to retell, Mary is confronted with the very hard to believe news that she is about to become pregnant. This requires repentance – rethinking what is possible and impossible for a virgin like herself. It requires faith. And then it requires receptivity, an openness to receive, expressed in the words, **“Let it be to me according to your word”** (Luke 1:38).

So what is it we receive when we repent and put our trust in Jesus? It's forgiveness, acceptance, love, hope, empowerment, strength, encouragement, perseverance, everything you need to live in the kingdom of God. But it is more. According to Jesus, we need to receive God's Spirit. Amazingly God wants to give us his own self. So we open our hearts to receive everything we need for life in the kingdom of God, including God's own Spirit. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, **‘Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom’** (Luke 12:32). If we do not cultivate this receptivity – we run the risk of thinking the kingdom is something we achieve rather than a gift we receive by grace alone.

The fourth move is about going public with your repentance, faith and receptivity through baptism. **Baptism** symbolises the move of repentance – my old life is being washed away, even buried. It symbolises faith – I am trusting Christ and his rescue mission through the cross and resurrection and I am following him in his kingdom. It also symbolises receptivity – I am receiving God's own Spirit and all he wants to give me. The amount of water we use is, I believe, less important than the amount of commitment and integrity with which you choose to go public and identify with Jesus, with the kingdom of God and with others who are seeking the kingdom with you.

These four moves are the preparations for the fifth and most comprehensive move, a move in which you will be engaged for the rest of your life. It is all about learning to follow Jesus every day. Sadly some regard becoming a Christian simply as a new status like becoming a member of a club. It is not. You are moving into a new practice, like a doctor entering the practice of medicine, a lawyer entering the practice of law, an artist entering the practice of sculpture. You are now launching out on a new life, a new vocation centred

on the practice of Jesus' message. When Jesus gave the Great Commission to go and make disciples he indicated that the essence of discipleship was obeying or practicing everything he had taught or commanded (Matthew 28:18-20).

As with medicine, law, art, music or any other discipline, you develop your skill through applying yourself to disciplines or practices. These include things like giving to the poor, praying and fasting. They work like exercise at the gym. As you practice, your 'muscles' develop – your capacities increase – so that you become a person capable of doing new things you couldn't do before, of living a new way of life you couldn't have lived before.

A story

A friend returns from holiday and tells you all about this new country he has visited. It sounds wonderful. He tells you stories about lovely, exciting people, beautiful scenery, rich culture and a sound economy. You've always been fairly satisfied with your own country but the truth is you have never known anything else. But now you start to think about the increasing pollution, the shallow reality TV culture, the boring scenery, the terrible weather and the struggling economy. You start feeling restless because of what you have heard about this new land. The final straw comes when someone tries to sell you a gas mask so you can breathe more easily on high-pollution days. You've had enough! You're leaving and going to start a new life in this new land.

So you gradually begin to imagine life in this new kingdom. You can almost see yourself there enjoying this better life. You still have questions. Have you really got enough faith to pack your bags and head for the border? Do you really trust your friend enough to make the move? But something won't let you settle back into the old routine and forget the promise of what you have glimpsed. So you sell your possessions and set off.

At the border crossing, you present your identity papers and declare yourself an immigrant. They ask you one simple question: *"Do you wish to leave your past behind and start a new life in our kingdom?"* When you say yes, they ask for your old passport and give you a new one. Then they explain that immigrants usually decide to wash off the pollution and smell of their old country so they can have a clean start in this new homeland. They recommend you take a bath. You agree and you are glad you did. You step outside feeling clean and take a deep breath. Your lungs feel as though you are inhaling pure health, joy and peace. It's as if the spirit of the new kingdom is entering you. You feel more alive than you have ever felt before.

You find a new home, meet your new neighbours and settle into a whole new life. There's lots to learn. For a start, the people speak a different dialect here. It's not the old familiar language of judging and bragging, insulting and lying. Instead you hear words of gratitude, encouragement and truth. You hear people admitting their faults and celebrating their joys. You also notice that people here living at a different pace than you're used to. They are not lazy and they are not workaholics. They live with an attractive rhythm, weaving together rest and work and worship and play and fellowship and serving and feasting and fasting. As you settle into your new life, you feel you have been born again into a new world.

For use in your

Cell, Accountability Group or on your own

Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear.

For those who have read or heard the sermon

Share your experience of '*repentance*' and '*believing in*'... How have you experienced and grown in '*receptivity*'? How would you describe your commitment to Jesus and his message at this point in your life? Have you ever '*gone public*' – and how?

For those who have **not** read or heard the sermon

Read together **Matthew 6:19 – 7:29** in sections and discuss the practical implications of the choices that are presented – two treasures, two ways of seeing, two masters, two priorities, two ways of treating others, two gates and roads, two kinds of prophets and disciples, two ways of responding to the message.

Pray for those who have just been baptised. Pray for each other as you seek to 'practice' this new life. Pray about the healthy exercise of spiritual disciplines.