

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



Part 7 'Jesus the Miracle-worker'

Matthew 9 & 10

15th November 2009

Last week we were thinking about how Jesus communicated his message about the Kingdom through parables. If you had gone up to Jesus and asked him what was the essence of this message, he would have said, *'You need to rethink the direction of your life and believe that something unbelievable is going to happen because the kingdom of God is here.'* If you had followed it up with a second question asking how he would describe this kingdom of God, he would have said, *'The kingdom of God is like a man who had two sons.....'* And if you had persisted with further questions about what this kingdom is really like, he would have continued, *'It's like a woman who was making bread...'* As far as words were concerned, Jesus communicated his message about the kingdom secretly through parables.

But Jesus did not limit himself to words. He also communicated the message through *signs and wonders*, through what we often call *miracles*. If we are to understand the role of miracles in communicating Jesus' message we have to understand and immerse ourselves in Jesus' worldview. A worldview is like a lens through which we view life. It is composed of assumptions, beliefs, values, ideas that we inherit from our surroundings, from our family and our culture. Like someone who has worn glasses for a long time, we are just not aware of our worldview. Consequently we do not examine or challenge it. But that is precisely what Jesus is asking us to do when he says, *'repent'* – think again.

In the worldview of most of us living in the modern West, our view of the world is best compared to a machine. If God exists, he designed and created this huge mechanism. He wound it up and set it in motion. It has been ticking away ever since, slowly winding down through a process called entropy. In this worldview, miracles, if they happen, would involve interference from outside. God reaches in and fiddles with the mechanism. In this view, God is outside. Natural causes create effects unless God intervenes. Some believe God does intervene (*supernaturalists*). Others maintain that he would never change the rules he set up at the beginning (*reductionists*).

Jesus lived long before complex machines. His worldview, his model of the universe, was very different – less mechanistic and more organic. In this worldview, God was neither absent and outside the universe nor trapped inside it. God was connected to the universe and intimately involved with it. The universe was less like a machine and more like a family, less like a mechanism and more like a community. That's what the word *kingdom* suggests. Kings are relationally involved in their kingdoms. They are present, active and engaged.

On the one hand, kings are not absent and disengaged like an engineer who builds a machine and leaves it running. On the other hand, kings are not in absolute control. They don't control their kingdoms in the way a youngster operates the controls of a computer game. In this much more organic worldview, kings have an interactive relationship. They have real power and authority but the citizens have wills of their own. The king may make laws but the citizens may choose to disobey them.

So for the ancient Jews the universe was not a simple, controlled, mechanistic system. It was a complex, organic community with limits and freedoms, accountability and responsibility. In this universe there is freedom – freedom for God and for humans. God gives us space and time to live our lives. It is a universe in interactive relationship with God. And Jesus' invitation into the kingdom of God was an invitation into the original universe, as it was meant to be.

That universe had been plunged into crisis because humans had abused their freedom. As a result, humans steal, kill and destroy. We hoard, rape and plunder. We oppress, victimise, lie and cheat. We undervalue precious things and overvalue worthless things. The world has become sick with a sickness that is ugly, painful and terminal. In Luke 10:9 Jesus said, **'Heal the sick and tell them the kingdom of God is near.'** The kingdom brings healing and hope to this sick world.

If you go into Marple Hall School and ask the students whether they believe God heals, you might be surprised by the number who say a definite 'Yes'. Many of them know that last term a boy with a broken ankle was prayed for at the Euphoria café and was healed. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of interest in the power of prayer and when our youth team go into the school they are often stopped and asked to pray with people. Well, last week they were asked to pray for a boy with a leg broken in three places. A few days later it was re-X-rayed and found to be completely healed. So the doctors removed the cast! Praise God. The kingdom is breaking in. It is a sign and a wonder – a *sign* that signifies the reality and nature of the kingdom – a *wonder* in that it fills you with wonder. It makes you think. It challenges your worldview and what you think is possible and impossible.

God is engaged with our lives and our world. From time to time we experience the touches of his grace, sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly. They are signs of God and his activity. And they are wonderful – they make us wonder what is going on and fill us with wonder. We can't explain them. They don't fit in with our western, closed cause-and-effect worldview. And they set us free from the tyranny of the impossible.

A woman with a drug addiction, a man with a rage problem, a country torn apart by religious strife, a school with chronic underachievement, a growing gap between rich and poor, a carbon-based economy that is out of tune with our environment – all of these attract the label 'impossible'. But when the kingdom of God breaks in, the word *impossible* evaporates and its tyranny over our lives ends.

We know that there were a few places – Mark 6:5 *And because of their unbelief, he couldn't do any mighty miracles among them except to place his hands on a few sick people and heal them* – where people were so locked into their worldview that they couldn't experience signs and wonders even in the presence of Jesus. But normally wherever Jesus went he was accompanied by these *impossible* experiences as he healed the sick, drove out demons and even raised the dead. Some signs and wonders were dramatic and public like the feeding of the five thousand, the calming of the storm, or when a dead person was brought back to life in the middle of a funeral. Others were less public, more personal. A Roman soldier's beloved servant was cured. A heart-broken father and mother received their little girl back from death.

Each sign and wonder was creative and unique. There was no formula or mechanism. On one occasion Jesus cured blindness with spit and mud. On another occasion it was through washing in water. Sometimes he came close and touched a sick person. Another time he would simply say the word from a distance. The miracles were very diverse but there were certain common factors.

1. Jesus' signs and wonders invariably brought **healing** and not destruction. He does not call down fire on resistant people as the disciples would have liked. The only exception was when a fruitless tree was killed and used as a sign and wonder of a different type.
2. Jesus' miracles were related to **faith**. They occurred either in response to faith or to stimulate faith. Jesus would often say, '*Your faith has made you well.*' (Not, 'I have made you well.')
3. Jesus' signs and wonders have a **symbolic** and secret meaning. It seems obvious that Jesus' healing of deafness would signify helping people hear the truth in their hearts. Healing blindness would suggest helping people 'see the light'. And what could be a more powerful dramatisation of the possibility of a new beginning and a new life than raising the dead? The calming of storms whether literal or in the life of a demonised person, the feeding of a crowd with a boy's picnic lunch – they all have a meaning for those *with ears to hear and eyes to see*.
4. Jesus' signs and wonders are clearly not the point. They are **signs** pointing to something else. They are the signs of an invasion. If not from personal experience, then from history and war films, we know the signs of an impending invasion – enemy planes overhead, paratroopers dropping from the skies, blackouts, sirens, bombs and rockets. But what if the kingdom that is invading is a very different kind of kingdom? What if this invasion is one of kindness and compassion not aggression and violence? What if sick people start getting well suddenly and inexplicably? What if rumours spread of storms being calmed, insane people becoming sane again, hungry people being fed and dead people rising? Could these be the signs of the coming of a different kind of kingdom?

The signs and wonders of Jesus and his church are an essential part of the message of the kingdom. They are dramatic enactments of this message. They tell us the impossible is about to become possible. The kingdom of God – with its peace, healing, sanity and freedom – is available to all, here and now. They make way for faith that something new and previously impossible is on the move. We are being invaded by a force of hope, a group of undercover agents plotting goodness.

The universe in which we live isn't a machine with a God who occasionally tampers with it from outside. It is more like a family, a community, or a kingdom. The signs and wonders of Jesus are secretly telling us that God, the good King, is present – working from the inside. The King is in the kingdom and the kingdom is among us here and now – for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. The King is present with us in all the mess and chaos of everyday life on earth, bringing healing, sight, perception, freedom, wholeness, health, nourishment and sanity. The invasion of the kingdom of God has begun. We are under a gentle, compassionate assault by a kingdom of peace and healing and forgiveness and life.

I think that is Jesus' secret message of his kingdom. Don't you want to be part of that invasion? Don't you want to hasten the arrival of that kingdom?

Ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit

We see the arrival of the kingdom in Jesus and in the power released at Pentecost. But God has also invited us to participate in unleashing these powers. He has given us the keys of the kingdom. While you cannot reduce the Christian life or ministry to a formula, there are certain pointers to this participation in the powers of the coming age.

1. **Expectation** – Where there is little expectation there will be little evidence of the Kingdom. The problem is that our God is too small and our worldview too restricting. If we want to increase our level of expectation then we must be reading our Bibles. We can also read about those high points of the coming of the kingdom in times of revival. There is nothing that will increase our faith more than seeing miracles happen. So hang around people who are ahead of you in the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
2. **Kingdom prayer** – ‘**Your kingdom come**’ is the most radical prayer you can pray. You are praying for the powers and ingredients of the future world to break into this world now. No point in praying that prayer if we have no expectation. We pray ‘Hallowed be your name’. This is the name of the king. We are praying – ‘God, you love to do this. This is your nature. Be yourself.’
3. **Kingdom announcement** - Mark 1:38 ***But Jesus replied, "We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too, because that is why I came."*** The word that is translated preach is the word for making a public proclamation. When the Roman emperor wanted to make a proclamation it was taken by heralds to each city. The moment they made their announcement it became legally binding. Now the words of Jesus unleashed the works of Jesus. ***Be healed. Be still. Come out of him.*** The announcement of the kingdom becomes the demonstration of the kingdom.
4. **Kingdom demonstration** - Up to this point we act in obedience. The rest we leave to God. We do not have to make anything happen. God is not under our control. He cannot be manipulated. Sometimes nothing happens. Sometimes something different from what we were expecting happens. Sometimes God turns up when we were hardly expecting it. But the more we do this in obedience the more we will see of the kingdom invading our world.

For use in your

Cell, Accountability Group or on your own

Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear.

Read together Matthew 9: 18 – 10:10

Share your observations, reflections, feelings and questions.

Review the idea of a modern Western worldview and the impact it has on our expectations and understanding of what God is up to.

Testify to your own experience of God’s touches of grace or miracles.

What is our responsibility in hastening the coming of the kingdom?

Pray for each other especially for any who are sick.