

Sunday 29 June 2025
St Peter and St Paul

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Zechariah 4.1-6a, 10b-end

NT: Acts 12.1-11

Gp: Matthew 16.13-19

'Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, and it is the Church that came'. These are the words of the Catholic theologian and biblical scholar Alfred Loisy, writing in the early 20th century. It puts the issue very directly. Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand. What we got was the church. It's tempting to say: what went wrong?

Today I want to ask: what is the relationship between the kingdom and the church? Are they one and the same? Or are they fundamentally different – even at odds with one another?

Our gospel reading is an interesting place to start. For one thing it is only one of two occasions when the word 'church' – the Greek *ekklesia* – is used in the gospels. And both of those occasions are in Matthew, with its clear interest in the life of the early Christian community. We're used to the idea that the gospels are not just eyewitness accounts of Jesus. They were written down decades after Jesus' death. Although they no doubt relied on strong oral traditions, they also reflected the needs and questions of the early church.

Has Matthew just written the church *into* Jesus' message? It seems odd that it is not even mentioned in the other gospels. Even in Matthew, it is far outweighed by references to the kingdom. The message of Jesus and his parables all are centred on the kingdom, not the church.

Perhaps Loisy had a point. Perhaps Jesus' preaching of the kingdom got replaced, shunted to one side, by the founding of the church. To find out if this is true, we need to ask: what *is* the kingdom of God for Jesus?

The first thing to note is that it is not a kingdom with a territory. The word translated 'kingdom' refers to the active presence and rule of God. It might be better translated as the *reign* of God. It is something dynamic and alive, not an occupied land to be defended.

The second thing to say is that the kingdom of God is not a reference to something that is exclusively in the future, still less to a heavenly afterlife. When Jesus talks about the kingdom it is clearly not yet fully here, it is still on its way. But *at the same time*, it is making its presence known. It is *among us*, Jesus says. The coming kingdom is both now and not yet. Already at work, already pressing upon our world, but also opening our world to a future we can't yet imagine.

So the kingdom is not a fixed territory, and it is not just in the future. The third thing to say follows from these: the kingdom is hard to pin down. In Jesus' parables and sayings, the kingdom might appear suddenly and obviously like lightning; or suddenly and deceptively, like a thief in the night. It can come in the most unexpected places and people: weeds growing into huge bushes, dishonest servants doing deals, women baking bread. And even though it is the kingdom of God, it is also very, very *earthy*. It has to do with vineyards and absentee landlords and lazy judges and working conditions and wages and eating food together.

It is no surprise that people have wrestled with just what the kingdom means ever since Jesus announced it. The kingdom of God does not fit our ideas of what a kingdom is, and perhaps not even of who God is. This is a kingdom that comes to let unlikely things grow, that opens its doors to unlikely people, that deals with the moral ambiguity of human life. It is not easy to define. It will not stay in one place. In fact, Jesus asks us to wrestle with this very truth when he teaches to pray: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. The whole idea of the kingdom is that the boundary between heaven and earth – a boundary we create to keep God at a safe distance – comes crashing down. And all heaven is let loose.

Given this, we can understand Alfred Loisy's point: 'Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, and it is the Church that came'. While the kingdom is hard to pin down, the church is an institution. Where the kingdom breaks down walls, the church erects them. The church can see itself as the gatekeeper between us and God, deciding who is in and who is out. It is a hierarchy, with its rules and boundaries. That is something Loisy found out to his cost. He was thrown out of his Catholic teaching position and eventually excommunicated for his views.

So, is it as simple as this: kingdom *good*, church *bad*? Surely that is too easy. From the beginning, Jesus did not just teach, he also gathered a community: the twelve disciples and many others, including important women apostles and disciples. That community was itself an expression of the kingdom breaking in. When he eats with people, he is sharing a kingdom meal. The kingdom is itself compared to a feast. In Luke's gospel, at the last supper, Jesus says 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' The Last Supper - and so our Eucharist - is a kingdom meal. It is a taste of God's reign in the present, a taste of what is still to come when all of human life and creation is freed and fulfilled.

The church has not always done a very good job of recognising this. Like many a human institution, it wants to police its borders, prop up its structures and hold on to its power. It wants to make itself important.

But doing away with the church is not the answer. That would just lead to a private, individual spirituality. No: Jesus calls us to make community and break bread *together*. Think of how the earliest church, in the book of Acts, was a sign of the kingdom:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

This is a church where eating together becomes a radical act. Where everyone has enough, because possessions are shared. Where there is growth - not because of flashy branding but because the community's generosity and joy overflow.

Can we be like that? Can we be a church that shares things in common, a church where all eat their food with glad and generous hearts? If so, then we might be a living sign of the kingdom in the world. We'll still be utterly imperfect. But we will have a precious gift to share, something deeply attractive to offer the world around us. All the more so because we are not clinging on to it as our own possession.

The church and its structures must always be provisional. Jesus himself worshipped and taught in the Temple and showed it respect as a faithful Jew. At the same time, however, he could look at its magnificence and say: not one stone will be left upon another.

The key thing is that the church must serve the kingdom, not the other way round. The church must be judged by the standards of the kingdom. It can never claim to possess the kingdom or be its exclusive voice and territory. The kingdom is always more, always elusive, always not yet, always *out there* in unexpected places and people. But it does also become present among us, as the hungry are fed and the powerless lifted up. Then the church becomes authentic and real.

So far, because I wanted to focus on the contrast between the kingdom and the church, I have not said anything about Peter and Paul. But they help to remind us of how the church is provisional.

Paul was the persecutor of the church who became the great apostle to the Gentiles, changing the church out of all recognition. In contrast, Peter was the leader of the twelve; here, in Matthew uniquely, he is named as the rock on whom Christ will build the church. He will have the keys to the kingdom. It is a text that has been used to justify the power of the church and the pope, the successor to Peter. But note the irony: almost immediately, Peter gets it wrong, tries to stop Jesus going to his death. Jesus says to him, 'Get behind me,

Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' The greatest apostle of all comes crashing down to earth. Read in context, our gospel is about the humbling of the church, not its glorification. And, of course, it is Peter who denies Christ when the chips are down. He cannot accept that the kingdom of God means to give power away, not to hoard it.

That is the wonderful thing about the gospels. There is no hiding the fallibility and weakness of these original apostles. Peter and Paul are deeply flawed human beings. The rock on which the church is built is also crumbling sand. In recent years, Pope Francis wonderfully embraced this. For all the pomp and power of the papacy, he embraced humility and humanity. All good popes remind us that they too are sinners in need of prayer and redemption.

The contrast between the church and the kingdom is clear. But it is not absolute. A humble church, a church of vulnerability and compassion can be a glimmer of the kingdom. A taste of it.

We can lose faith in the church. There have been many reasons to do so recently. But God never loses faith in us. The church is not the kingdom. At its best, however – at its most open, humble, generous and joyful – it is where God comes and eats with us. And where we catch the vision that sends us out to a waiting world to say: the kingdom of God is among you.

Fr Steven Shakespeare