

Who Are the Poor? What is the Gospel? And How Do We Bring It? – A reflection on the manifestation of the Kingdom of God among us.

Jesus said two things about the kingdom of God that I find fascinating. First, when asked how one should pray, the first request he said we should make is, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The second is this, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news.” I believe these two statements reflect a commitment of Jesus to do something very specific. They reflect the vision of Jesus’ earthly ministry. He was sent by God to bring the kingdom of God to earth...now!

The Bible tells the stories of many kingdoms that have been on earth. Abraham was to be the father of many nations and kings were to come from his lineage. Jesus, as God made flesh, looks at all these kingdoms of the world and finds them to be incredibly inadequate. The sinfulness of humanity as manifested in greed, selfishness and oppressive power have brought about the destruction of humanity throughout history. Each nation believes they have the solution and strives toward a perfect manifestation of humanity living together, failing to recognize the persistent tendency toward selfishness. Those who lead these nations do so as sinful people creating sinful structures that oppress people.

Jesus comes on the scene and announces a new kingdom has come near and to pray for it to come and for us to be bringers of that kingdom. It is a different kind of order. At the center of this new kingdom is the redemption of all people who are now able to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, to love one another and to love our neighbors as ourselves. What is set aside is our self-centered focus that is self-destructive and a shift of concern to others.

The kingdom of God is the vision of Jesus’ work. Now let’s talk about the mission:

Read Luke 4:14-21

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Quoting from Isaiah he announces that He has fulfilled this passage and this is what his work is going to be about.

Of all the people groups in the world, of all the classes, of the different ethnic groups and races, those who are poor are the primary focus of his work. Why? Why does Jesus, God made flesh, set these people apart as deserving special attention from him? Because every kingdom can and should be judged by how it cares for and respects its weakest members, not its strongest. But throughout history, kingdoms and nations have given preference to its strongest members.

The kingdom of God restores dignity to these members of our society by treating them as people created in the image of God rather than problems to be solved, objects of our charity or worse, people to be eliminated.

Who Are the Poor? – the result of the kingdoms of this world

The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

So who are the poor that Jesus is referring to?

First, I do not think Jesus is comparing our poverty to God's abundance. Before God we are all in need. Even the wealthiest among us stand as beggars before God. In this reference, everyone is poor.

Neither do I think Jesus is referring to spiritual poverty. Although this is indeed the ultimate poverty and leads to poverty in other areas of our life. I do not think Jesus is speaking metaphorically in this passage. Following this statement and even more so in Isaiah is a list of people who are likely to experience very real poverty and in some very desperate ways.

The poverty that I think Jesus is referring to is a poverty that is a way of living in the world as a result of systems that reduce people to their economic value.

The system rewards those who function well in the system, who know how to get things done and generate income for themselves even if it is at the expense of others. It also rewards those who are born into those classes that know how to work the system to their advantage. But the system also punishes those who do not do well. These are people who often are not able to negotiate the economic systems, the materialism of the culture. They are the ones who because of physical or mental disabilities are not able to function well. Though we clearly are excited by those who overcome their disabilities in the system and do well and are thus rewarded. But not everyone is able to do this, and these individuals are often left excluded from the benefits of knowing how to live within the system. And every bad decision they make diminishes their economic value creating a cycle of diminishing returns. We view them as worthless and they in turn view themselves as worthless.

The result of this poor economic value is people who are stripped of their dignity and often isolated from the larger community. They are left to figure it out for themselves and when they fail, we blame them and give ourselves an excuse to not be involved with them.

Contributing to this view of people is our own perspective – How we view ourselves and how we view others.

First, we view ourselves ethnocentrically. Our way of living and our culture are superior to all others. Such a view of ourselves has led to the horrendous treatment of people who do not fit into this view of ourselves.

Second, we view others as a result of their sinfulness and are offended by this. Our offense keeps us from seeing them as they really are – people created in the image of God. Ultimately what I am most offended by is seeing my own sinfulness in someone else. I condemn myself for this sinfulness and I condemn them even more.

These two things, among many others, keep us from entering into relationships with people who are struggling with poverty and thus keep us from being bringers of the kingdom of God.

What is the Good News? – the manifestation of the kingdom of God

*The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring **good news** to the poor.*

The good news is that a new kingdom has come, a new economy, and in this kingdom people are not first viewed by their economic value. The kingdom of God introduces a new order of relationships and community. And it is the community of those who have been redeemed by God himself, transformed and created for good works. Each person has inherent value because they are created in the image of God. The fact that they are sinful, have made bad decisions and have hurt others has no bearing on this inherent value. Regardless of their sinfulness, they are made in the image of God. Each person has inherent dignity. And their bad decisions do not diminish their inherent value. They are still beautiful and we need to see them as beautiful.

It is on the basis of a person's inherent value that Jesus went to the cross willingly. He offered himself as a sacrifice for people because they were made in the image of God.

For the weakest and poorest members of a society this truly is good news. That a person is no longer valued on the basis of their economic capacity, but rather on the basis of who they are created to be, is amazingly good news. It is awesome news filled with hope.

To be bringers of this kingdom of God means looking at people, all people through a different lens, not on the basis of how things are but how they can be.

How do we bring it? – the Church as the kingdom of God

*The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to **bring** good news to the poor.*

The good news of the kingdom of God is carried to others. It is brought to them and it is primarily brought through what God has established as the visible expression of

the kingdom of God on earth – the Church. The good news of the kingdom of God is brought to others through community. Jesus in his earthly ministry brought the good news to the people, first establishing a fledgling community of 12 people. They did not do this perfectly and many times they mis-interpreted Jesus. But Jesus continued to maintain that it was through them – the Church – that he would bring the good news of the kingdom of God.

At the center of this community is always Jesus, the author, perfecter and redeemer of us all. The faith community continues to identify people to embrace that can be drawn closer to Jesus. Regardless of where they come from, what their background is, what sin is destroying them, how they have hurt others, there is always the opportunity for them to become part of this faith community. We do not draw lines as to who is acceptable and who is not. None of us are acceptable before God except by the grace of God. But regardless of their background, we want to create contexts in which they can come into the community if they choose to. Not because we are making them or manipulating them, but rather because they are choosing to do so. And as they make that choice, we seek to draw them closer and closer to Jesus, the one who can restore them to the image of God in which they were created.

As part of this community called the body of Christ, we each individually have a part to play with the unique gifts that God has given us in bringing this good news to the poor. Let us be faithful in using these gifts to love and good deeds so that people can enter the community and be drawn to Jesus. Please notice what I have said here. We do not first set the bar at them coming into a “personal relationship with Jesus” and being baptized as the criteria for entering the community. We do not set a behavior standard for them to enter the community. The Church comes to them and embraces them and draws them into the community for who they are – beautiful people created in the image of God – in spite of how they have been damaged by sin and the bad decisions they persistently make. We draw them into the community because we love them. We don’t tell them how to live their lives if they want to be part of us. We welcome them as they are.

I love seeing this in children. You have seen it too. A child goes up to another and asks, “Do you want to be friends?” There is little regard for the economic value, their clothing, the color, etc. They just extend the invitation to be friends. This is how the church brings the good news to the poor – Do you want to be friends?

And as they enter the body Christ, we want to draw them closer and closer to Jesus, who can transform them into the people God created them to be. And, as Isaiah said, they become the oaks of righteousness through which God performs his miracles.

Those who claim to be part of the kingdom of God view everything through the lens of loving God, loving one another and loving their neighbor, shifting from a self-centered focus to an others-centered focus. By fulfilling these commands in the context of the body of Christ, we become bringers of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

“The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon **YOU**, because He has anointed **YOU** to bring good news to the poor.”

So, are you ready to wrestle with these questions:

Who are the poor?

What is the good news?

How are you going to bring it?

They will change the way you “do” Church. Instead of “going to church,” once a week, you will BE the Church everyday, manifesting the life of Christ in all that you do. And when you do, you will fulfill Jesus’ prayer – Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.