The Kingdom and the King
Luke 9:1-17

A different kind of Kingdom

I don't know whether you spotted it, but these 3 brief accounts – Jesus sending out the twelve, Herod's perplexity about who Jesus is and then the feeding of the 5000 - are linked by a common theme, and that theme is the kingdom of God.

Jesus sends out the 12, Luke tells us in v2, 'to proclaim *the kingdom of God'*. When they come back he takes them aside to a quiet place, but this large crowd of 5000 men comes to him and v11, Jesus 'welcomed them and spoke to them of *the kingdom of God*.' And sandwiched between Jesus sending the 12 out to proclaim the kingdom and Jesus doing it himself to this crowd of 5000, we have Herod, a king, confused in his own mind as to who this Jesus is that he keeps on hearing about.

But there are other clues that tell us this is all about the kingdom of God as well. You see the other Gospel writers tell us that the place where the feeding of this crowd occurred was an isolated spot out in the hill country, it's the area we now know as the Golan heights. But that begs a question, doesn't it? What is a crowd of 5000 men doing up in the hills like that? Are they just out for a hike and a picnic, but – O dear – to a man, they all forgot the picnic? And why do they come looking for Jesus like they do?

Well, both John and Mark fill in the blanks for us. Mark says that when Jesus looked out over this vast crowd 'he had compassion on them, because *they were like sheep without a shepherd*' (Mark 6:34). And you could read that and think, 'ah that's nice' - this nice pastoral scene, rolling hills, lush green English countryside and everyone sits down to a nice picnic because Jesus comes up with the goods when everyone else forgot!

But there's more going on here. You see when that expression that 'the people were like sheep without a shepherd' is used elsewhere in the Bible, it's always to do with the people of God needing someone to lead them. In Numbers 27:16-17, just before his own death, Moses prays a prayer that reveals his concern that the people not be left without a leader: "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be *as sheep that have no shepherd*.' And God answered Moses' prayer by raising up Joshua. So Jesus looks out on this mass of men and sees them as needing a second Moses, a second Joshua to lead them and shepherd them.

But Jesus wasn't alone in thinking that: the men wanted that for themselves. John tells us (John 6:15) that these men were there to 'take [Jesus] by force to make him king.' Which is why there were 5000 men out in isolated hill country, hill country by the way that was outside of king Herod's jurisdiction. Just like revolutionaries and guerilla fighters take to the hills, this area Jesus is in is rebel country and these men are looking to Jesus to lead the rebellion, to overthrow Herod and his cronies, to free them from the oppression and the occupation of the Romans.

So do you see how this theme of the Kingdom runs through these accounts? Jesus sends out the 12 to proclaim it; Herod the king misses it; 5000 men looking for a king and in response Jesus speaks to them about the kingdom. And yet for both Herod and these 5000 men, the Kingdom that Jesus has come to establish falls outside their realm of expectation.

Let's take a look at Herod first. Luke tells us that having got the 12 all together Jesus (v1-2) 'gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal'; which they did. They spread out across the region, effectively multiplying Jesus' ministry. And news of what was going on in the towns under his jurisdiction reaches Herod. He's already heard about Jesus, but now this Jesus-thing is spreading and multiplying and reports of the disciples proclaiming another kingdom are coming in from all over.

And Herod is perplexed, v9, "Who is this about whom I hear such things?" Now that's a common theme in Luke, isn't it? Who is Jesus? Now, Herod is not short of other's opinion on what is going on: John the Baptist – the man he murdered - has come back to life, Elijah the end time prophet has appeared, or one of the great prophets from the past has come. He has all these views – one person saying one thing about Jesus, another saying another, and Herod is left perplexed. Now, does that sound familiar to you? Because today we are no shorter on opinions as to who Jesus was and is than back then. Ask people in the street and they'll say: a good man, a great teacher, an alien from outer space, a legend. People still try and define Jesus on their terms and in the hope of finding alternatives to who Jesus said he was. And Herod, faced with all these opinions, and all the reports he hears, is left scratching his head, wanting to see Jesus.

But before you feel sorry for him, or think of him as a genuine seeker, remember that the next time we meet Herod, in Luke 13, he is trying to find Jesus to kill him. And when he does finally get his chance to meet Jesus, at his trial, just prior to his crucifixion, Luke tells us that Herod 'treated [Jesus] with contempt and mocked him' (Luke 23:11) – dressing him up like a king in fine clothes, before sending him back to Pilate to be executed. So, despite it all happening before his very eyes, and on his own turf, this earthly king ends up mocking the true king and his kingdom.

Now, no one here is going to fall into the same category of Herod, but what his response teaches us is that it is possible to think about Jesus, to debate about Jesus, to hear opinions of Jesus, even to the point of wishing you could meet Jesus and ask him some questions, and still miss it completely. To be interested but never entrust yourself to him, to follow him like you might follow the football results, but not follow after him as a disciple. And how you respond to Jesus critically depends on how you answer this question that Herod was grappling with, and failed so spectacularly on, the question Luke keeps reminding us of: 'who is this man Jesus?' It is, perhaps, the crucial question of life; because so much hangs on how you answer it.

But if Herod was perplexed by Jesus, Jesus was no less perplexing to the men in the hills wanting Him to lead them in revolution. Because just as Jesus' kingdom was something Herod could never understand, so Jesus hadn't come to march at the head of any popular uprising. He hadn't come to take up arms, or give the signal for the insurrection to begin, or head down from the hills to take the city and march on King Herod. Instead when this great crowd, this army in need of a king, comes to him, he teaches them and explains the kingdom of God to them. You see these men are hungry for change and Jesus tells them about the kingdom, where the change that matters happens in the heart.

When challenged later by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus said 'it doesn't come with signs to be observed… the kingdom of God is inside you.' God's kingdom, Jesus says, is wherever God reigns as king, and the seat of that reign is the heart of individuals. So the change that these 5000 men want to see so desperately will never happen by a change of government, because that's not where the real problem lies. As some one has said, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. And so the revolution that Jesus has come to lead, the insurrection that needs to happen, happens in our hearts. It's the glorious revolution of overthrowing self and enthroning God as king in the seat of power in our lives.

But lest you think it's all talk and no action, both in sending the 12 out, and in his response to the 5000, Jesus makes it clear that this kingdom is both soul and body, it's word and deed. Sending out the 12 he tells them to proclaim the kingdom, but also to heal the sick; and when this crowd gathers to Him Luke tells us that as well as speaking to them of the kingdom of God, (v11) 'he cured those in need of healing' and he fed them.

So, this different kind of kingdom Jesus has come to establish begins in our hearts as Christ rules as king. But it can never remain a private affair of the heart. Firstly, it's a kingdom to be shared, to be proclaimed, to be spread around as the disciples did. But secondly, it's a kingdom that calls us to a life of sacrificial service, of caring and giving and laying down our lives for others. And like these men, gathered in the hill country, we might long for change, in our marriages, in our families, in our workplace and in wider society, but it begins with transformed hearts as Christ reigns as King and as He takes ground there as King, and as we live his rule out, serving others.

And that is something all of us are called to get involved in, no matter how inadequate you might feel.

Inadequate ambassadors of the king

Now in the second half of Luke chapter 8 we've seen Jesus' power and authority close up. We've seen his power over the forces of nature, over the forces of evil, over the forces of disease and ultimately over death itself. But in sending out the 12 on this mission trip he shares out some of that power and authority and lets them play as well. He's been training them, but now comes the practical bit of their apprenticeship, because Jesus knows it's these men who are going to carry on the work of extending the kingdom when he's gone. But it didn't stop with

them either did it? It's not like there was Jesus, then the 12 and then nothing, nor is it that there was Jesus, then the 12 and then some kind of elite priesthood whose job it is to carry on the work. No – as John Wimber said, 'everyone gets to play' and the picture of the New Testament is that the church is a body, with every believer equipped and gifted in all these different ways, to see it grow, and the role of leaders, Paul says in Ephesians 4, is to see that happen (4:11-12): "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints [that's you and me] for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

Now when Jesus sent out the 12 they may have felt some anxiety about what lay ahead, but if they did, we don't get to hear about it. But what we do get to see in Luke and the other gospel writers is that when they come back they are full of it. They have had an amazing time seeing demons flee and the sick healed and people respond to this message of the kingdom.

And there are going to be times when you feel really up for it, when you feel equipped and ready and walking in your gifting to serve someone in this or that area – to care for them or speak some word of counsel into their life, or talk to them about Jesus. But there are going to be other times when you feel anything but ready for the task, and the disciples come back from a mission trip full of what God has been doing through them and are immediately thrown into a situation where they feel horribly out of their depths.

Because as the day wears down and the shadows lengthen, the disciples spot a problem with this great crowd: they need to eat, and they suggest that Jesus send them away to go and get food. But Jesus seizes the moment as a teaching opportunity and says to them, v13, 'You give them something to eat' or in the words of Matthew's account, 'they need not go away' – they don't need to look anywhere else, you have the answer – 'you give them something to eat.'

And the disciples' response is: Us? Us feed this crowd? How could we possibly do that? Now, don't you recognize that response? Me? I couldn't possibly do that – talk to that person about Jesus? I mean I just get tongue-tied, and help or care or counsel this person, I just wouldn't know where to begin, Jesus.

And yet Jesus is insistent, isn't he – you give them something to eat. I want you to meet this person's need, I want you to speak into this person's life, I want you to give yourself into this situation, and we are left thinking, but I just don't have it in me. And the disciples could come up with just two options: either they shared what they had, 5 small little barley loaves and a couple of dried fish, or they went shopping; both of which ideas were going nowhere. The one thing that would have worked, they didn't consider – and that was: ask Jesus. And when asked to feed this crowd, the disciples' knee jerk reaction, just as ours is so often, was to focus on what they didn't have, and couldn't do, and not on Jesus and what he can do.

And these disciples standing before this huge crowd, and you and me facing whatever the Lord might call us to, feel totally inadequate in ourselves, but it is

that very inability to meet the need out of our own resources, that is the open doorway to Jesus' provision. Even the amazingly competent apostle Paul knew what this felt like. He knew that in himself he was nothing and had nothing (2 Cor 3:5) "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us." But that wasn't where he was putting his trust "but our sufficiency is from God who has made us competent to be ministers [servants] of the new covenant." Competent, adequate, up to the task, able to feed this crowd or meet this need in ourselves? No way – but it is precisely that inability that is the necessity for service in Jesus' kingdom, so that it's clear that it all comes from him.

And Jesus uses this crowd in need of dinner to teach these disciples, and you and me, facing an ocean of need, that our ability to serve and care and help does not depend on us but on him. That was after all the point of his travelling instructions prior to the mission trip – 'travel light, no staff, no bag, no bread, no money – trust me to provide for you' – and they had seen how God could do that, and now with the crowd before them, they get to see again what happens when you depend on and trust Jesus.

But watch how Jesus does it. In v16 Luke tells us that Jesus 'broke the loaves *and gave them to the disciples* to set before the crowd.' Jesus could have had all the people line up and receive it from *him*, as if to underline just how useless the disciples were; but he doesn't. He lets them share in the work, they end up feeding this multitude, just as he said they should, just as he had sent them out on the mission trip, with his delegated power and authority, simply by receiving from Jesus and passing it on.

You see, they didn't have to do the food multiplying bit, it was never in their power to do that, they simply had to receive humbly and distribute faithfully. Which is what all of us, however inadequate we feel, are called to do. To receive with joy what Jesus gives us and then pass it on.

But it's not all a bed of roses. Because implicit in Jesus' instructions to the 12 when he sent them out was the expectation that they will encounter opposition and rejection: v5, 'wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.' And before his death in John 15:20 Jesus says to the disciples, 'Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.'

So, if the king gets flack, his ambassadors will too. If the Herods of this world mocked Jesus, so we can expect the same. So when it happens, when you dare to step out and speak up for the gospel and it doesn't go well and maybe you even get slapped down – don't take it personally! You're an ambassador, and sometimes ambassadors have to take it on the nose for the king. Your responsibility is not to be popular, nor are you ultimately responsible for how people respond to the gospel when you share it with them, your and my responsibility is to be faithful, and truthful.

But this message of the kingdom, in response to which there can be no neutrality, is that the king has come who can truly answer our inner longing.

The King Has Come

This feeding of the 5000 is really an acted out parable – a multitude of people looking for a leader to free them from oppression, who are hungry for change, but who are also now physically hungry; but that hunger cannot be met by anything the disciples can offer them, except what Jesus offers. And as the disciples hand out the broken bread and fish, Luke recounts in v17 'and they all ate and were satisified.' Jesus had met their hunger.

I was reminded whilst working on this passage that the French, atheist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre said, "That God does not exist, I cannot deny, that my whole being cries out for God I cannot forget." And it is that innate, inner longing for God, to find ourselves in Him, for the world and our place in it to make sense, that Jesus fully meets, and this miracle of Jesus breaking the bread is an acted out parable of that. In fact, in John's gospel, Jesus uses this event to tell the people later, 'I am the bread of life.' I'm the very thing, the only thing, that can meet the hunger in your soul.

But that inner hunger for reality and meaning, Satre's whole-being cry for God, can never be met just by bread, or possessions, or status, or career success or family, or any number of other good things that we might seek to fill the void and feed the hunger. Jesus meets that cry, that hunger, not by breaking bread for food, or filling our life with stuff, but by being broken himself. And the next time we see Jesus blessing bread and breaking it, is at the Last Supper when he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and said, this is my body, broken for you.

You see, rather than this being a kingdom that comes by force – this kingdom comes by the king laying down his life, being broken at the cross, that we might find wholeness, being poured out unto death that the thirst of our hearts for life might be fully satisfied. And it is knowing his love for you, so supremely demonstrated at the cross, that gives you the ability to weather whatever opposition for his sake that might come your way, as well as answering that cry for meaning, forgiveness, for hope and for satisfaction. Because the true king and his kingdom have come.