

11 The Love of the Kingdom

10: 25 - 42

That kingdom is offered to all the people, but not all see it as an offer. A lawyer wanted to put him on the spot, so he asked him: “Master, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?”

We perhaps think we know what “eternal life” means, but we need to clarify what it probably meant for the lawyer, who didn’t have hundreds of years of Christian tradition behind his concept. And the gospel so far doesn’t help us. Up to this point, Luke has not said anything about “eternal life”. He has spoken of salvation, forgiveness, healing and the coming of the Kingdom of God. Nor does he make any effort to explain here what the lawyer means. We can only suppose that he means it to be taken in its normal Jewish context.

Many of the Jews believed that, at the coming of the Messiah, or on the Day of God’s final revelation and judgement, the dead would be raised, or at least all those who had been faithful to God would be raised, and that these would live forever in his glory. Not all believed it. The priestly and aristocratic party, the Sadducees, did not believe in the resurrection, but those who did would have spoken of “the life to come” or “eternal life”. It did not involve belief in an immortal soul, but in God’s power to restore life and limbs even to the dead. Nor did it involve “going to heaven” but God’s rule finally coming about in a world restored. It was different from the picture we have built up over centuries of Christian tradition drawing on Greek philosophy. And altho our traditions might be true, we should not let them get in the way of what Luke and the gospel are saying.

Jesus said to the lawyer: “What does it say in the law? What do you read in the scriptures?” and the lawyer replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus agreed. The man had rightly identified the very hub of the Law, and Jesus said to him “Do this, and you will live.”

A straightforward answer to a straightforward question. But it was all too easy. When you put what you think to be a challenging and discerning question, you don’t like to get a simple answer that makes your own question look simple. Your reputation as a scholar demands some wrestling with the

issue. So the lawyer tried to show there was more to his question: “Who is my neighbor?” he asked.

Jesus answered:

A man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho was waylaid by robbers. They stripped him of everything, beat him up and left him for dead. A priest happened to come by on the road, and, seeing the man, went by, avoiding the body. A Levite also came by and carried on, avoiding him. But then a Samaritan travelling on the road came by and, seeing him, was moved to help him. He went up to him and bound up his wounds, putting oil and wine on them. Then he lifted him up, put him onto his own beast and carried him to the nearest inn, where he took care of him. The next day he gave two denarii to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him, and on my way back I will pay for any extra expenses you incur.”
(10: 30 – 35)

Jesus asked the lawyer which of the three had shown what it is to be a neighbor, and the lawyer agreed that it was the man who showed compassion. It isn't, in fact, a matter of deciding who is and who isn't your neighbor, so as to limit the scope of your responsibility. That love of your neighbor enjoined by the law is universal. It extends to anyone – even the national enemy – who needs your practical, helping love.

Jesus said to the lawyer, “Go and do the same yourself.” Then, moving on, they came to a village where he was given hospitality by a woman called Martha.¹ Martha had a sister named Miriam, who sat at Jesus' feet, listening to what he said, while Martha busied herself about the hospitality. Martha, it would seem, wanted to do justice both to the house and to its guests by providing amply – nothing left unthought of – for their wants. She was exasperated that Miriam did not come and help, so she complained to Jesus: “Master, aren't you concerned that my sister has left me to do all the work on my own? Tell her to come and help me.”

I imagine Miriam jumping up at this point, feeling a little guilty, and Jesus signalling her with his arm out to stay where she is.

He said to Martha: “Martha, you're fussing and worrying about a whole lot of things when really very little is needed. If you just gave us one dish, it would be enough. Miriam has chosen the better part, and it won't be taken away from her.”

¹ Luke 10: 38 – 42

Jesus Kyrios

The story of the “good Samaritan” is possibly the best known story from all the gospels, and the incident of Martha and Miriam is also very well known. It is often commented on. But we don’t think of them as being together, altho they stand here in Luke’s gospel one right after the other, and Luke is never a careless story teller.

What they have in common is the theme of love, neither a sentimental feeling nor a mystical experience, but the fundamental, inclusive bonding that makes us not just humans, but humans together. If the Samaritan shows us love in very practical action to serve the needs of another, whoever he is, Martha shows us loving service that is a bit too much tied up with the need to be needed and so overdoes the response. She has to be corrected by Jesus, who affirms that love can be simply sitting together, speaking, listening, sharing, as Miriam shows it.

Love is what binds us to God and to one another, and if we ask how far it should go, the answer, which Jesus gives us, is that it has no limits. The love of God, that fundamental and all-surpassing allegiance to God that takes up and directs our whole heart and soul, all our thinking and all our energies, is the utter fulfilment of the Law. To belong willingly to God, to obey God with enthusiasm, to receive with an open heart the love God gives to his people, to value God in all our living and doing and being, because God is good – there is the very making of eternal life in the kingdom of God.

And when you spell out the love of God, you do so in terms of solidarity with your neighbor. This teaching on love is rooted in the history of Israel, the bonding of people to people, tribe to tribe, in one nation created by God. Their loyalty to Yahweh their God was, from the beginning, to be reflected in their loyalty to one another, holding to one another in justice and compassion as one people. Love, as God had taut it to Israel in her history and her Law, is the bonding between people that makes them a community and a nation, identifying themselves in solidarity with one another.²

Now Jesus’ story affirms that Law, but radically challenges it even in the affirmation. That love, that bonding, is no longer to be exclusive. They are no longer to bond in solidarity against the outsider, but even the outsider, even the enemy, even the despised Samaritan, stands within the solidarity of neighbors that the Law of God commands. There is certainly no negating of the Law, but Jesus’ teaching lifts it up to serve a deeper, wider imperative.

² cf The Warrior God, ch 2

It is the Law renewed to reflect a love that encompasses everyone. The Samaritan shows them how.

And with Miriam and Martha Jesus shows that same inclusive solidarity reaching out again in a way that affirms what is good in Israel's tradition. Traditionally, men sat at the feet of learned teachers to learn the law, to understand better its implications and how they might properly put it into practice. So they became good Jews and learnt to obey God in all his requirements. Women would learn from their mothers, their fathers and their husbands how to obey the Law.

Now, however, Jesus shows a new inclusiveness. The welcome that made Miriam feel safe to sit and listen like the men, for she too could learn from the master, and his defence of her, when Martha wanted to pull her back into the woman's role, declare a new equality, where women and men bond with Jesus to be the people of God. It's not, I think, that Miriam sat contemplating a religious mystery, but the "word" of Jesus to which she was listening would have been such teaching as we have heard in this gospel: the good news of God's kingdom come upon earth, the real and immediate challenge of it and its implications into our practice and relationships here and now.

We should not think of a guru expounding mystical truths, but rather of men discussing a revolution, the coming of a new order in society and civil relationships, for that's what the kingdom of God is. That's what the story of the good Samaritan points to. We should think of disciples talking over the experience of healing, the liberation of tortured minds and bodies. We should think of Jesus glorying in the signs of a harvest well begun, and speaking of his relationship with God that issues in such achievement. And we should think of Jesus reminding them that they were on their way to Jerusalem, where there would be death and defeat, before the triumph of God.

With due respect to some of the great thinkers of Christian history, I would say it is misleading to say that Martha represents the active and Miriam the contemplative life (which Jesus therefore recommends as "the better part"). Jesus' teaching, his words as we have heard them, have a wholly active bent. They lead to decision and action in the context of family, social, civic and economic life. The discussion, and there has been much of it in the gospel – between angels and people, Miriam and Elizabeth, John and the penitents, Jesus and Satan, Jesus and his own people at Nazareth, Jesus and the crowds, Jesus and his disciples, Jesus and the Pharisees – has not tended toward the mystical or the contemplative. It has focused on the

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rescue of Israel, the fulfilment of Israel's history, a new order and a new way of action in the life and the world we know, obedience to God that changes the very order of society and realigns its most entrenched relationships.

When Miriam sat at Jesus' feet, she was hearing of this and learning to be part of it. But I can understand why the church prefers to think of her as the contemplative. The Christian Church has not found it easy to get on with the teaching or the example of Jesus. For centuries, the only high status role allowed to women was that of contemplative nun.³ A male-dominated Church was much happier to recommend this role to women than any role of active participation in the thinking, planning and carrying out of the great changes called for in the coming of God's kingdom – which is what Jesus was doing with his disciples when Miriam came and joined in their group.

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In a few short episodes (little more than a chapter, as we now divide Luke's gospel) we have seen at last what the kingdom of God is to be. From the start of the gospel we knew that Jesus comes as the King and Savior, and now we are able to see what his kingdom is like. It is not to be the crass invocation of superior power, even God's power. The Samaritans who turn their backs on Jesus are not to be punished with a bolt from heaven – in fact, unlike the Israelite towns that reject him, they are not to be punished at all.

Nor is it a step into power and privilege for those who become its servants. To follow Jesus is a life of hardship and deprivation that demands utter and unhesitating dedication, for it is indeed the coming of God's rule, which pits the servants of God against a world that will not welcome God's rule. But neither is it some sort of masochistic grovelling in defeat. The strength of God does triumph and is seen to triumph, in the healing of ills and the defeat of evil. The kingdom of God is coming, and those who are its heralds, in whose work it begins to come, are instruments of the very salvation and

³ Even the role of active nun, going outside the convent walls to tend to the needs of the poor, is a comparatively modern invention, from Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in seventeenth century France. The linking of the contemplative ideal with control over women's ambitions led inevitably to the corruption of Christian institutions, with convents becoming a useful holding place for those daughters of the aristocracy whom their fathers could not afford to marry off. It also led to the remarkable character, Teresa of Avila, whose determination to reform the convents and restore the practice of a genuine contemplative vocation brought her into vigorous and active interaction with the powers of Church and society in sixteenth century Spain.

judgement of God. They can rejoice that their names are already written in the book of the realm of God.

At the center of this revelation is Jesus himself, whose soul is lifted to see the work of God recognised by simple, ordinary people, while the experts, who think they know so well how society is to be led, altogether fail to see what is happening. Jesus is at the centre of a mighty revelation, of a radical change in the way the world is to be, for he alone, as the Son of God, knows God, the Father, and is able to show to his followers the whole reality of God.

They are blessed in that revelation, a vision of God that kings and prophets had longed to see but had not seen; yet it is not the mystical vision of some other world and reality, but the living vision of God at work in this world, creating God's kingdom. It is the new order where the Law of God is carried out, yet the very barriers of culture and national identity which the Law had been used to define are swept away. A Samaritan loves and helps a Jew. A Palestinian loves and helps an Israeli.

This is a new undertaking, where women and men share in the project, a new shaping of hearts and wills, of towns and societies; the challenge, not of a world to be looked for somewhere else, but of God establishing God's radically different rule in this world and history where we are. I have spoken of revolution, because that is how we are to see Jesus and the coming of the kingdom. The twentieth century was made and marred by revolutions. It evolved from the nineteenth century as the fruition of the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth. Yet much that was hoped for from the revolutions of the twentieth century died in greed and cynicism, and the twenty-first will have to take stock of why that is. It will have to begin again, finding a new way of changing and inspiring change, of claiming and building justice and human dignity. Our part, as Christians, is to recognise and show how the great revolutionary hopes of the twentieth century failed because they failed to be radical enough, to recognise the radical difference made by the rule of Jesus and the coming of God's kingdom. They attempted to shift power; but the coming of the kingdom of God puts power right out of the game.

For the rule of God, God's strength put forth in Jesus, is mightier than all our efforts, yet it does not come by power. It comes by the vindication of Jesus who will be put to death in Jerusalem.