

Jan. 21, 2024  
The Third Sunday After The Epiphany  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10, 1 Cor. 7:29-31 (32-35), Mark 1:14-20  
“The Culture of the Kingdom”

Today we hear from the Gospel writer Mark, in which he records the first words from Jesus after His baptism. Mark says this is “Good News from God” and so we wait with expectation.

What more will Jesus say? Will He say something eloquent, wise, deep and meaningful? Will everyone gasp and swoon as He speaks this glad announcement from God?

But all He says is, (and this is a paraphrase from our text this morning) *“The time has come, and the kingdom of God is within reach, so turn your life around and get on board”*). And that’s it.

I checked Matthew and Luke and they don’t even have that much. It’s not really a grand entrance, is it?. The heavens didn’t open up to reveal the Messiah as prophesied. There was no ‘Tada! Here I am after centuries of waiting; the Messiah that you’ve been waiting for’. Not even three cheers from the crowd.

In fact even though Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, He never stops to define what He means. So let’s talk about the word “kingdoms” in general for a minute and see if we can’t understand that term a little bit better.

If I asked you what images come to mind when you think of the word ‘kingdom’, I bet we would get a variety of responses. Of course, the obvious one for us today is the Kingdom of Heaven but some of you might think of the kingdoms in fairy tales like, Never-Never Land, or Camelot or the Land of Oz.

Others of you might think of the ‘Game of Thrones’ or ‘Lord of the Rings’ as types of kingdoms, and still others of you who might enjoy medieval history might have a much darker image of kingdoms with heartless kings, greedy nobles, poverty and disease.

The Old and New Testament, the understanding of the Kingdom of God includes a feeling of hope, joy, peace, a new beginning, a new king, a new Israel and the great feeling of coming home.

But I want to try to find a better way to explain what that might mean for us today so I'm going to choose to use the word 'culture' to try to explain God's kingdom.

Now that might seem a strange word to use, but let me explain. When I worked at Street Reach and especially in the downtown east side in Vancouver as a social worker, there was a certain way of doing things and not doing things. A culture of the street. A code. Rules and regulations that everybody seemed to follow if a person wanted to survive.

That was very noticeable especially if someone was new to the area. They may have come into the area with an "it's all about me attitude" but in a couple weeks, things usually changed and the change usually showed itself with a couple bruises on their face.

Once they understood the lay of the land and the culture of the street, they seemed to fit in just fine. There was an understanding of how to do things and how not to do things and once that was accepted, new comers usually fit in that community quite well.

Understanding the culture of an area is important to how a person survives on the street or in any job, sport or vocation. Understanding the culture helps new comers get along with others and usually prevents any future trouble or hardship.

In whatever we do and wherever we go, there is a definite culture of how to do things, what to do and what not to do. Rules that everybody knows and sort of live by in order to keep good order and understanding.

And it's much the same anywhere you go. No matter where you live or where you travel, culture shapes the way we behave, what we say, how we do things, how we survive.

We might understand why the word 'culture' is used to explain the impact of Jesus' announcement that the Kingdom of God is here, because Jesus is saying that with God's kingdom there is a culture shift.

He is saying, "Now" is the time to abandon (repent, turn away from) the values of the culture of this world and get on board. Now it's time to immerse yourself in God's new culture, God's new way of living, a new way of looking at the past, present and future, God's new values of hope, love, forgiveness, compassion, boldness, and so on.

To be immersed in the culture of God or in His Kingdom is major shift in a person's life. The disciples, Jesus called that day along the shores of Lake Galilee heard Jesus simply say, *"Come with me"*.

Come with me and turn away from the culture, the lifestyle that is focussed on yourselves, your sinfulness, and follow Me. Come with me and turn away from the culture of this world with all its distractions and self-centredness that drives a wedge between you and God and get on board with God's culture.

God's new way of living, changes the way we think about the world and others, the way we see nature, the way we treat people around us and our self. The way we interact with the pain and hurt and suffering in the community around us.

Jesus says, Come with me and get on board with this radical new turnaround way of living, it's a whole new culture, a whole new way of living. That's what the Kingdom of God is all about.

As with my experience on the street, getting to know the culture of poverty took many years to accept and understand. It took a while to be fully immersed and understand a culture that was a radical shift from what I was accustomed to.

That day along the shore of Lake Galilee, the disciples made the first big step on getting on board with the new culture of the Kingdom of God. It took a while for them to fully realize what it all meant – in fact, it took them the next three years and the rest of their lives to really get it.

So what has all this to say to us today? I dare say that many of us have been participants in the church for many years, maybe a lifetime, and perhaps others a shorter time, but no less dedicated. But does that matter?

It's easy for us to take for granted the Kingdom of God and the radical shift it's supposed to bring into our lives and completely miss the culture change that is supposed to happen, as brothers and sisters in Christ living as God's children in His Kingdom.

It's far too easy to fall back to our old self of becoming self-focussed, inward looking and always putting ourselves first. In fact, even without us realizing it, – a culture other than the Kingdom of God can easily take over our life by adopting ways and values that we know are not God-pleasing but very much worldly. Throughout Paul's letters he urges his readers to follow the way of Jesus not the ways of the world.

You see, as Christians we live in a situation of constant tension between what is God's way and the way of our own desires and the world. As people who follow Christ, who live in the culture of the Kingdom of God as well as the culture that surrounds us, we often find ourselves in conflict between the two.

As those who have been baptized in Christ and put on the nature and characteristics of Jesus – His love and compassion, His gentleness and forgiveness, His patience and self-giving, his focus on the needs of others before his own needs – as we live in this kind of atmosphere and culture... this will often bring us into a conflict with ourselves and the values and acceptable standards of the people around us.

Being "in Christ" is a tough call. Getting on board with the culture of the Kingdom of God is a real challenge. The apostle Paul says, *"Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think."*

In Ephesians he says, *"Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like him. Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us"*. Or in Philippians he says, *"All I want to know is Christ"*.

You see Paul is talking about a Christianity that's not just in our heads but influences and affects and infects everything in our lives. Not one corner of our being is to be left untouched by the "new thing" that Jesus brings into our lives.

In fact we are to be totally immersed, soaked, saturated in the culture of the Kingdom of God. That's why Paul often talks about becoming more and more *"like Christ"*. *Follow His example. Try to be like Him.*

So there are many things that we can celebrate today about our country and the standard of life that we enjoy without a doubt. We have so much to be happy about and thank God and there are many good things to celebrate in our Canadian culture but let's not be so patriotic that we don't see that many times Canadian culture can and will put us in conflict with the culture of the Kingdom of God.

Being "in Christ", "bearing the image of Christ", being "like Christ" is a challenge in our modern world. It's easier to blend into our Canadian culture and accept even though we know that it goes against our calling to be "like Christ".

We know that the apostle Paul also struggled within himself about how well he followed Christ's way. He often said that he knew what the right thing to do was, but for some reason he kept on doing the wrong thing. Does that sound familiar?

But like Paul, we know that in the Kingdom of God we find the forgiveness and newness that Christ has won for us and this is always our struggle. The things we want to do, we don't and the things we don't want to do, we keep doing.

Today we have to ask ourselves, which culture are we going to allow to shape our hearts, minds, attitudes, lifestyles and relationships and not the least with God himself? What is it that, which forms our identity – is it the culture of the world or is it the mind of Christ?

What I can say to you is "Let God be God in your life" Let Him rule you and guide you're your mind and heart by His Holy Spirit. Never forget that the Kingdom of

God, the culture of God, has come to you. God has chosen you to be His. . .  
. Christ is in you; . . . you are in Christ.

So get on board. The world, our nation, needs you and me to be “like Christ”.  
That’s who we are, that’s our identity, that’s our culture and that’s the Kingdom  
of God. Come and follow Christ. Be His example to the world, knowing the  
forgiveness of sins is your and the Kingdom of God belongs to you. May God bless  
you and keep you in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.