CARLISLE DIOCESE

ON EARTH AND IN HEAVEN... PREPARATION

LIVING your call

The basics

Write down 3 or 4 sentences about what you understand by the Biblical phrase 'Kingdom of God'.

Where have these thoughts come from?

Why do you think Jesus tells his Disciples to pray for God's Kingdom to come?

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Going deeper

What does each of the following Bible passages have to say about the characteristics of the Kingdom of God/Heaven? (*For our purposes we're treating both terms as the same*). Write a couple of thoughts in the spaces provided. This is not a test! The aim is just to get you thinking on the topic.

Matthew 4.7
Characteristics:

Matthew 13.31-33; 44-49
Characteristics:

Matthew 25.31-46
Characteristics:

Mark 10.13-16
Characteristics:

Luke 17.20-21
Characteristics:

Others you might think about:

Matthew 13.24-30
Matthew 18.23-35
Matthew 25.14-30

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Then, when you have spent some time on this, note down brief answers to the following two general questions:

1. **Are there any other important characteristics of the Kingdom of God which are not mentioned in any of these passages?** One way to think of this is to think about the nature or characteristics of God – the reign of God will reflect the character of God.

2. **Think about how you would describe the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom – is there a brief way of summing it up?**

If you have time and would like to go deeper, you could read the following two short articles on particular gospel passages – again, only if you have time, you could have a think about the following questions:

1. Is Philip's way of reading the parable of the workers in the vineyard the way you usually understand it? Why might Philip be so concerned to understand the parable in this way?
2. Compare Guenther's understanding of the verses from Matthew 13 with your own. What is different and what is similar?

Prayer suggestion:

Have a prayer walk around your neighbourhood praying for people and places as you go.

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The Justice of God by T.V.Philip

Matthew 20: 1-16:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like this. There was once a land-owner who went out early one morning to hire labourers for his vineyard; and after agreeing to pay them the usual day's wage he sent then off to work. Going out three hours later he saw some more men standing idle in the market place. "Go and join the others in the vineyard," he said, "and I will pay you a fair wage"; so off they went. At midday he went out again, and at three in the afternoon, and made the same arrangement as before. An hour before sunset he went out and found another group standing there; so he said to them, "Why are you standing about like this all day with nothing to do?" "Because no one hired us", they replied; so he told them, "Go and join the others in the vineyard" When evening fell … those who had started work an hour before sunset came forward, and were paid the full day's wage. When it was the turn of the men who had come first, they expected something extra, but were paid the same amount as the others. As they took it, they grumbled at their employer … But he replied… Why be jealous because I am kind? Thus will the last be first, and the first last.

This is what justice means in the perspective of the kingdom of God. In Matthew chapter 18, the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a king who decided to settle accounts with the people who served him. In chapter 20, it is compared to a householder who went to hire labourers. Both are about the character of God and the nature of his kingdom. Peter asked Jesus, how many times he should forgive others. Jesus' reply implied that we cannot put a limit to the love and generosity of God.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers. He hired some and agreed to pay a day's wage. He went out three hours later, then at midday and then at about three in the afternoon, and hired labourers. Yet he seemed to be restless lest someone might still be unemployed. He went out again before sunset and saw another group standing and waiting for employment. He asked them why they were waiting all day long without doing any work. They answered, 'Because no one hired us'.

It was a sad situation. It is an irresponsible society which does not care for all its citizens; an unjust society. These people had been waiting from early morning till evening, waiting and hoping that someone would hire them, for, if not, their families would go hungry. They were desperate for work. The landowner went again and again searching for the unemployed, because no one else was interested in them. He understood what it meant to be unemployed; he understood what it meant not to be wanted by anyone. Their reply was: nobody wanted us, nobody noticed us waiting, nobody asked us why we were waiting all day long, and nobody cared for us.

Unemployment, not being wanted, is not only an economic problem but also a spiritual problem. It demoralizes people. It destroys the very personality of the unemployed.

It is a sad judgement on our society when human lives are wasted because we do not care for them. In this parable, what is important to note is that the landowner went again and again and hired the labourers.

- He did not find fault with them because they had no work.
- He did not tell them that it was their fault they were unemployed.
- He did not tell them that they were school drop-outs who had wasted the opportunities given to them.
- He did not tell them that they were drug addicts.
- He did not tell them that they did not deserve any attention from the good and hard working people in our society.

Do we not live in a society where we constantly hear it said that taxpayers' money should not be wasted on the unemployed, on the Aborigines, on the refugees, on the disabled?

The landowner knew very well that they were in that situation because the powerful in society, the wealthy and the influential, even the educated and the religious, had created this terrible situation where millions of people had no work.

In the Gospels, Jesus criticized the religious leaders, the political leaders and his own disciples. But he never criticized the masses. He knew very well their faults, their weaknesses. They were not saints. But he also knew their predicament. He had only compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

In the Kingdom of God there are surprises. Those who worked the whole day got a full day's wage. But those who worked only for one hour also got a full day's wage. This is the righteousness of the kingdom. This is what justice means.

In the society in which we live, those who have a good start in life, those who are influential and well educated, they get more. Those who run faster will be rewarded. Those who are strong will exploit the weak. This is the righteousness of the world.

In the perspective of the kingdom, those who are powerful and influential will not get more. A society is just only to the extent that the underprivileged, the disabled, the poor and the oppressed receive special care. God who does not forget the sparrows will not forget the least in our society.

God's arithmetic is different. He does not add or calculate wages as we do. He does not fix wages according to the number of hours we have worked. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord says:

> *My thoughts are not your thoughts,*
> *neither are your ways my ways.*

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As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah SS: 8-9)

According to the psalmist: 'The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.' (Psalm 145: 14)

This is the new thing about the kingdom of God. Those who worked all day complained – not because they did not get their wage, for they got it. They protested because others also got the same wage. They were sad and frustrated because the landowner made those who came last equal to them. 'Are you envious because I am generous.' God's justice is this generosity of God.

T.V. Philip, "The Justice of God (Matthew 20: 1-16),"
in *The Kingdom of God is Like This*
(Tiruvalla, Kerala, India:
Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
and Christava Sahitya Samithy),
https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-justice-of-god-matthew-20-1-16.

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Living by the Word (Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49a) by Margaret B. Guenther

When Jesus tells a story, he compels us to look at holy things with new eyes, and he illustrates his stories with references to ordinary, homely things. If he were operating in the 21st century, I doubt that he would need a blackboard for complex mathematical formulas, or the arcane jargon of a modern expert–whether economist, computer maven, biochemist or theologian. Jesus told stories about ordinary things to explain the extraordinary, the inexplicable.

His gift of imagery is one of the great gifts available to us as humans Because most of us never outgrow our childhood love of pictures, we respond well to teaching that invites us to create pictures in our minds Imagery helps us to grasp that which cannot be quantified, measured or neatly captured in words, charts or formulas. With images, we manage to approach the intellectually and spiritually unfathomable because we are led gently, told that a God who ultimately is beyond our comprehension is like a shepherd, a king, a loving parent, a mighty fortress or a maternal figure with great sheltering wings.

In this passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is teaching his friends about the kingdom of heaven, which is the same as the kingdom of God. Although kings are now out of fashion, and the mystique of royalty has eroded, they were real figures of absolute power and grandeur in Jesus' time. I doubt that his hearers had had any more direct contact with kings than any of us has had. But they understood the vocabulary of kings and kingdoms even though they did not always understand what Jesus was trying to tell them.

We have enough residual memory to glimpse what Jesus is telling us about God and God's reign. When he speaks of the "Kingdom of heaven," we are reminded that God is absolute, that God's reign is not a democracy or even a republic. At the same time, we're reminded of our own smallness and limitations in God's great economy.

And when we pray regularly, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we realize that we aren't praying for the establishment of some grandiose political entity in the fashion of extravagant King Herod or the British Empire in its glory days.

So what are we praying for when we pray, "Thy kingdom come"? What are we asking for?

Jesus gives us some hints. It's like this, this and this, he says–offering tantalizing bits of imagery for all sorts of people: the farmer who finds a treasure in the field, the shrewd financier who recognizes the ultimate good investment, the plant enthusiast who marvels at the growth produced by one tiny seed, the angler who finds a shoal full of fish, and—humblest and to me most appealing—the homemaker preparing to bake bread.

There are common qualities in these images. The kingdom of heaven is hidden, buried in a field or in the depths of sea, and of great value, a treasure or a pearl. Moreover, despite an unremarkable outward appearance, it possesses surprising power. The unprepossessing mustard seed contains an astonishing potential for growth, while leaven—ordinary old leaven that doesn't look like much—has the power to transform all that surrounds it.

At one time I was a fairly competent bread maker. I baked all our family's bread and came to know and respect the mysterious power of leaven. The yeast I used was a grainy, grayish substance without much taste or smell. In Jesus' time, the yeast was a little lump of active dough that was carefully saved from a previous baking. Like my little packets of yeast, it carried within it the secret of growth and fermentation, the power to Change something that vastly exceeded it in volume. A couple of spoonfuls could work amazing changes in a bowl of flour.

But leaven sitting all by itself can't do anything. It needs the right conditions: it must be mixed with flour; the temperature must be warm enough but not too warm; there must be liquid and a bit of salt.

Then the leaven does its work, quietly, taking its own time, but ultimately transforming a sodden, useless lump of dough into bread.

I love this picture of the subversiveness of God, even if it makes me uneasy to contemplate the hiddenness of God's kingdom. This kingdom is right here, right now, as invisible and as unobtrusive as a lively, enlivening bit of leaven stirred into the inertness of the flour. Jesus reminds us that the kingdom is both coming and already here. He reminds us that the power of God can be and is working in us if we let ourselves be open to it and take it into ourselves. After all, like the leaven that works only when it is combined with flour, the kingdom of God, the power of God, is among us, permeating every aspect of our lives, changing, enlightening and transforming us.

Margaret B. Guenther, “Living by the Word,”
The Christian Century, 125/14 (July 15, 2008): 21.