

Sermon for Pentecost 9 at St James

Text from the day's Gospel Luke 12 v. 32-40

'Do not be afraid, little flock: the father has chosen to give you the kingdom'

I will try to answer four questions that the gospel sprung in my mind and may have cropped in yours as you heard it read:

1. Who is Jesus speaking to when he addresses them as 'little flock'?
2. Why might the little flock have been fearful?
3. What has the father given them that constitutes a kingdom ?
4. How should the flock respond to the father's generosity?

The answer to the first two questions is found as Ch 12 opens, where we read that people were trampling over one another to hear what Jesus had to say but 'he began to speak to the disciples'. The 'little flock' is the small group of close friends and admirers with whom he is travelling round Galilee. That flock had good reason to be afraid because large, unruly crowds were being attracted by the message that Jesus was spreading around. Disturbing the peace was a dangerous thing to do because those that currently preserved the peace were doing very well, thank you, from it. The flock were treading on thin ice and icy waters faced those who fell through. As Jesus' message spread, opposition would mount to the point that the very survival of the flock would be threatened.

The answer to the third question is more problematic. What exactly is this 'kingdom' that the little flock have inherited ? I fear that neither our little flock nor the church as whole has really grasped what 'the kingdom' is? In her book "Freeing Jesus", as in her other writings, Diana Butler Bass sometimes plays around with words, inventing new ones. She drops the 'g' from kingdom to produce 'kin-dom' and opens up fresh meaning. Kingdom conveys the notion of power invested in a one person and can hardly be given away to others. By

contrast, Kin-dom conveys an image of a fellowship of equals, dedicated to mutual service and so gaining great support that money can't buy. Our collect today stuck in my craw because it is a 'kingdom' prayer rather than a 'kindom' prayer, a prayer of 'subjects' rather than 'shareholders'.

'Open your merciful ears, O lord, to the prayers of your humble servants and, that you would graciously grant what we ask, make us desire what is pleasing in your sight.'

Is our little flock so enfeebled and are such words empowering in this day and age?

An inkling of what 'kindom' is all about was evident in the reactions of the little pride of lionesses to what they had achieved in winning the European Cup. Crowds were trampling over themselves to hear what the successful team (aka flock) had to say in Trafalgar Square a few days later and enthusiasm is now trickling down to our school children. God was making his pastime, nothing less than his kingdom, all that he had created and hoped to achieve, accessible to all, there and then. No wonder the powerless, whose lives had nothing to celebrate, were trampling over each other to hear such good news from the mouth of His ambassador

As to the fourth question, "How should the 'little flock' should respond to their new, God-given 'kindom' status ?", Jesus expectation that they should 'give up possessions' was coming a bit late in the day. The disciples had already sacrificed such things in getting to this point. They were gaining so much from their current fellowship that material wealth was a minor issue. The expectation is really meant for the wider audience that the little flock would be attracting. Luke gets round that rather clumsily in the opening verse of next week's Gospel by having Peter ask "are you speaking to us or everyone?" and Jesus ignoring the question. Clearly this expectation applied to all inheritors of the kindom, indeed was its essence.

The high expectation was coloured by a growing belief amongst the 'little flock', after Jesus' death, that he would return very soon to consummate the kingdom on a 'day of judgement'. Luke may have

exploited this expectation by using 'project fear' tactics and tweaking the parables that ends our gospel (vv35-40). A warning from Jesus that the disciples must be ever-watchful to avert real and present danger from powerful adversaries may have been adapted to shock a wider audience and get compliance from those thinking of joining the flock. Thus, the expectation to forget your own welfare would become a warning that, when the day of judgement arrived, the activities of Jesus followers must be appropriate for those that had inherited the kingdom.

Dropping the 'g' from kingdom makes the prospect of a 'day of judgement', if and when it comes, less daunting. Inheritors of a 'kindom' would be keeping lamps permanently lit in service to kinsfolk. Such service unites the person served with Jesus as though He was serving at their table in real time and not at some indefinite time in the future. There is no higher estate than being ever-ready, one might-even say 'oven-ready', to meet the needs of others. In a kindom, God's will is being done 'on earth as it is in heaven', as intended from the dawn of creation.

Having answered the four the questions raised by our text, we can and should ask ourselves a fifth question. How relevant is that text to our little flock, gathered this morning, in church and at home? We are certainly afraid but the grounds for our fear are very different from the little flock in the gospel. Our problem is not one of crowd control and disturbing peace in our community: our community, like most, is increasingly turning their backs on our message!

What should our response be? We could show ourselves to be inheritors of the kindom of God, rather than serve as an edge of town and out of touch museum for inheritors of an impersonal kingdom. Perhaps we should review things that we say and propose to do in our new church season through the lens of 'kindom' rather than 'kingdom'. I think Diana Butler Bass would approve, seeing it as a way of 'Freeing Jesus'!

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