

when either the Shulamite or others are not acting according to righteousness. It is during these times that she is being refined and ultimately is seen “com[ing] up from the wilderness, leaning

upon her beloved” (8:5) to be united with him in the glorious marriage of the Lamb.

(To be continued)

Exhortation

Who is your King?

Geoff Henstock

Mark introduces the start of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee thus: “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God”. This article explores the key idea behind the phrase ‘the kingdom of God’ using the Parable of the Sower.

WHAT IS THE Kingdom of God? If each of us answered that question we might each give a different answer, each of which may be correct in its own way. The Kingdom of God is at the core of our faith. It is one of the two pillars of the faith: the apostles preached the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:12). In the lead-up to the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, John the Baptist called upon men to “Repent . . . for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. So what is the Kingdom of God?

Well, the Kingdom of God is many things: it has many facets depending on the angle from which we view the Kingdom at any particular time. At its heart, however, the Kingdom of God involves the concept of God’s sovereign power, God’s authority as the supreme power in the universe. So the Kingdom of God is all about who exercises authority in our lives; is it man or is it God?

Parables of the Kingdom

Matthew 13 is all about the Kingdom of God. The word ‘kingdom’ appears twelve times in the chapter (vv. 11,19,24,31,33,38,41,43,44,45,47 and 52). The great theme of Matthew 13 is the Kingdom. The opening verses of the chapter are very significant in this regard: “The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying,

Behold, a sower went forth to sow” (vv. 1-3).

Matthew emphasises that the parables he records in chapter 13 were spoken on “The same day”. The same day as what? The same day as the event recorded at the end of chapter 12, when Mary and some of her children came to Jesus and sought to stop his preaching work: “While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father Which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother” (vv. 46-50).

Our Lord recognised that there could be only one authority in his life, and that was God. His mother, no matter how well-intentioned her actions, could not be allowed to distract him from doing God’s will. Jesus told his followers to focus on the will of God (v. 50), and Matthew carries on this theme in chapter 13 as Jesus talks to them about the Kingdom of God. His message in this chapter is that God is supreme and we must place Him first in our lives. Nothing should be allowed to distract us from doing God’s will. It is in that context that Jesus delivered the parable of the sower in verses 3-9, which he explained in verses 18-23.

Different types of people

No brother or sister is included in the class described in verse 19. These are people on whom the gospel makes no impression at all. The second

group, described in verses 20 and 21, are people who show interest in the gospel when they hear it preached. But, having heard the Word, they make no effort to cultivate their interest or understanding. The seed is left to struggle without proper encouragement. The gospel does not provoke a proper response. God is not recognised as the highest priority in their life; they do not accept the authority of God over all others. It is inevitable, then, that these people will wither and fail in the face of opposition.

The next group, to which the Lord refers in verse 22, is one with which all of us should have sympathy. This verse speaks of competition in our lives crowding out the things of God. Other forces and interests consume our energy, our time, our affection and our allegiance. The opposition force that overcomes this candidate for the Kingdom is described as "thorns". That should ring a bell. When man sinned, thorns were among the curses that God imposed (Gen. 3:18). Thorns are also mentioned by several of the prophets as a metaphor for punishments inflicted by God on His faithless people (for example, Isa. 5:6; Jer. 12:13; Ezek. 28:24). And we remember, too, that, prior to the Lord's crucifixion, his enemies mocked him by thrusting on his head a crown of thorns.

Thorns in our lives

Thorns are an apt figure for that which is in opposition to godliness and to faithful and obedient submission to Almighty God. In the natural world, thorns and weeds are much more vigorous than the plants we wish to cultivate. The same is true in the spiritual world. The cares and concerns of daily life very easily supplant God in our affections and distract us from that which is eternal. Faithful commitment to God's service is quickly swamped by other forces: the demands of our work, our families or our interests. We might claim to be the servants of God our King, but our actions often suggest we are really servants of another king. And that other king is usually ourselves.

Thorns are not the only thing that threatens to undermine our commitment to God. The Lord refers in verse 22 also to the "deceitfulness of riches". As natural men and women we are easily seduced by the prospect of riches. But riches are deceitful because they deceive us into thinking that we depend on our own efforts and our own ingenuity to prosper, whereas in fact at all times and in all ways we depend on God.

Let us not be distracted from our service to God either by the cares of this life or by the pursuit of wealth.

The final class described in the parable, in verse 23, is the one to which we all should aspire: "he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty".

Focus on fruitfulness

True servants of God do not allow other forces to distract them. All their energy and skills are devoted to God's service, and through God's grace they become fruitful. We all have different talents and skills, but we can all be fruitful in God's service. If we wish to be fruitful we need to take steps to ensure we can produce fruit. When we plant a crop we prepare the soil in accordance with the needs of that crop. We add fertiliser as necessary and then we plant the seed at the right time. We tend the growing crop as it progresses, making sure we water and feed it according to the circumstances and the environmental pressures it faces. Finally we harvest it at just the right time. Producing a crop is far from a haphazard exercise; it requires planning, effort and care.

The Apostle Paul referred to the sowing of the seed of the Kingdom: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building" (1 Cor. 3:6-9).

Serving the King

The seed of the gospel has been sown in us, and various servants of God have watered that seed. It has germinated and is growing. Let us take care that we do all we can to ensure that it continues to flourish and bring forth fruit to God's glory, for we are the crop that God is tending. Let us take care not to allow another authority to distract us from the sovereignty of Almighty God. Like our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his death, let us always be ready to say to God, "Not my will, but Thine, be done", for that is the essence of the Kingdom of God. Then we can sincerely pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth [i.e., our earthly bodies of dust], as it is in heaven".