

What if... we lived as citizens of the Kingdom of God

Message for Sunday, July 26, 2020
by Bruce Fraser

I grew up in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. To travel to the United States, you drive south on highway # 2, and then # 36. The border crossing is near the village of Coronach. But back in the early 1800s, if you travelled that way, you'd have no way of knowing when you had entered the USA. There were no border crossing points, no Customs officials to check your vehicle for drugs or guns. Indeed, some Americans did cross the boundary without realizing it, thinking that they were still in the American "wild west." The red-coated North West Mounted Police had to convince them that things were done differently in Canada.

Come with me on an imaginary journey through time and space. We'll go back to Jesus' time, and we're riding camels across the wilderness. There are no fences marking the boundary lines between the territory ruled by one king and the next area controlled by another king (rulers were mostly men back then). We don't have a map showing one country in pink and another in green. And we certainly don't have GPS, which can pinpoint our location anywhere on earth. There's just endless hills, with occasional streams surrounded by lush vegetation. We have no way of knowing when we've left one king's domain and entered another.

Each evening, as darkness nears, we follow a stream to the nearest village to spend the night. We find a clearing to set up our tents, and tie our thirsty animals near the stream so they can fill up with water for another day.

Even though we don't know the name of the ruler over this land, we can learn quite a bit about the ruler's personality. Suppose the people in villages several nights in a row have been suspicious and unfriendly. Anyone who gives us shelter hurries us on our way in the morning. They don't even trust one another.

Quite likely, the ruler of that region is terrified of being overthrown. Any stranger may be a spy for the enemy—any enemy. This particular king probably even suspects his own family of plotting

against him. Not surprisingly, the people are also hostile and suspicious. Strangers are not welcome.

But suppose one day after another long trek, we come across a village where the people are different. They are friendly. They invite us into their homes. They're not afraid. We would know immediately that we are in a different kingdom. A different kind of person is in charge here.

That's how it was when people met Jesus. People were struggling to survive, just trying to get by from one day to the next, worried about how to pay their taxes or face the wrath of the Roman enforcers.

The local governor, Pilate, was ruthless. Like many of today's tyrants, Pilate used fear to keep people under control. He had a reputation for cruelty. Human life meant nothing to him. And he despised the Jews; anyone who wasn't a full Roman citizen was inferior. So he had no qualms in executing Jews whenever there was trouble, and sometimes even when there wasn't trouble, just to make sure they knew who was boss.

The people lived in a climate of fear and suspicion.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, one day they found themselves face to face with someone who was different. His life, his words, showed that there was a unique power in his life. He didn't recognize the Roman emperor Caesar as his ruler. He wasn't subject to Pilate.

I mentioned that Pilate didn't even blink when it came to killing people. Yet all four gospels agree that Pilate hesitated to kill Jesus.

Pilate was dumbfounded when he met Jesus. I expect his advisors had told him some of the gossip about this new religious phenomenon. But nothing prepared him for the moment when they were together.

Everyone else feared Pilate; Jesus had no fear. Everyone else used Pilate to get favours. Jesus asked for nothing, not even his life. The Gospel of John has a record of their conversation: John 18:33-38.

Pilate and Jesus talked about being king, but they were talking about two very different things. Pilate is talking about a king who grasps power, forces

people to submit by his might, who maintains authority through fear. Jesus is talking about a king who keeps nothing for himself, whose subjects submit voluntarily, whose authority is based on his leadership example of love.

Pilate asked Jesus if he were the King of the Jews. Jesus replied, “My kingdom is not of this world.” In other words, “My kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world.” Let’s compare the kingdoms of this world to the Kingdom of God Jesus talks about.

Kingdoms of this world	Kingdom of God
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the love of power • Force people to submit out of fear • Maintained by fighting and killing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the power of love • People willingly and gladly join; they are attracted by Jesus’ example • People serve because they love him

Jesus calls us to be part of the Kingdom of God. We are to not grasp for power, to enjoy special honours and privileges, but to become servants—to become like Jesus.

You see, the kingdom of God isn’t a place, like Canada or the United States. Rather, it’s a new way of thinking, a new way of believing, a new way of living. It means that those who commit their lives to Jesus Christ now have a new allegiance. They follow a new leader.

That’s what you do when you’re a Christian. You follow Jesus. You follow his example, you follow his teaching, you adopt the values and attitudes he showed.

This is how Jesus described the complete change that happens when someone becomes part of the kingdom of God:

Matthew 13:44-46, The Message:

“God’s kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field for years and then accidently found by a trespasser. The finder is ecstatic – what a find! – and proceeds to sell everything he owns to raise money and buy that field.

“Or, God’s kingdom is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is

flawless, he immediately sells everything and buys it.”

Two things we see here:

- a) Being part of the Kingdom of God means abundant joy and fulfillment. This is what life is all about.
- b) Being part of the Kingdom of God means our whole life. It’s not just what we do on Sunday morning. It’s all week long. It’s what we do at school, at work, when shopping, when relaxing—*everything*. It’s how we treat other people; it’s how we use our money; it’s how we treat our bodies; it’s how we use our time. Our lives are no centered around ourselves; our lives are centered on Jesus, and loving and serving others in Jesus’ name.

We are called to make a difference in our communities. Someone may say, “What can one person do?” Well, one person having a couple of drinks before driving home can alter the lives of several families forever. One person can start a nuclear war. If one person can cause so much harm, why do we find it hard to believe that one person could also bring about good? Is the power of evil that much greater than the power of good?

You may heard the story of Tom Moore, a British veteran of World War II. He was in hospital a couple of years ago for a hip replacement, and was amazed at the compassionate care he received from all the staff. So this year, with health care staff under such stress due to COVID-19, he wanted to give back. On April 6, he decided to walk the length of his garden (25 meters) 100 times before his birthday, April 30. With family and friends contributing a few pounds for every lap, he dared to hope that he might raise £1,000. He did ten laps per day, and reached his goal of 100 laps well ahead of schedule. So he kept on doing it, ten more every day.



Oh, did I mention: that's his 100th birthday.

But then the unexpected happened: the news media picked up the story, and it spread around the world. By the end of his birthday, April 30, almost £33 million (that's \$56 million) had been donated. He now holds the Guinness World Record for the most money ever raised by an individual. And just this past week, Queen Elizabeth made her first contact with the public since isolation began months ago. She knighted Tom Moore.



What about you? You may not be able to stop the famine that's going on in Yemen or the endless conflict in Israel. But you can treat the person down the street with respect and dignity, even though you have different values.

You may not have the power to stop all the violence against women in our society. But you can tell your friend that you will no longer tolerate his insulting sexist jokes.

You may not know how to cure Lou Gehrig's disease. But you can spend time with someone who has it.

The Good News on every page of the Bible is not that we will escape evil; but that when it comes, we can confront it with power and confidence. We do this because, despite the fact of evil, there *is* an all-powerful, all-seeing, and loving God. As much as that paradox may cause us to wonder, it also gives us hope and strength. The Kingdom of God will prevail in the end. We do our part, and trust God to do his part.

I believe God is in charge. I am going to live like a believer.

Next Steps:

- Read Matthew 25:31-46. Look around you. Who is hungry, thirsty, lonely, needing clothing, or in prison? Who is sick or elderly? What would you like someone to do if that were you?
- It's easy to judge others when we don't know their whole story. For a change, instead of looking down on someone who behaves or thinks differently from you, ask to get together with them. "Tell me about yourself, I'd really like to know." Listen. Not argue. Just get to know the person. Care about them.
- When it's possible again, volunteer for a day at the Food Bank, a nursing home or some place where you can serve others. If you're making a difference, continue. If not, try something else.