

Seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness

6 November 2016 - Bible Reading: Matthew 6:25-34 (NIRV)

While I was on study leave Melanie and I went into the Department of Internal Affairs and applied for NZ citizenship.

We are currently permanent residents who have the right to live and work in NZ, so the clerk who was processing our papers said, *you know you don't need to become citizens.*

We don't have to, but we want to. NZ is our home, we have lived here for over 34 years, we have raised our family here, we have worked here and been part of everyday NZ life.

All going well we are looking forward to having NZ passports for our next overseas trip.

I am a British citizen, applying to become a NZ citizen, and I also hold citizenship of another place – heaven!

God has said through the Apostle Paul, ... ***our citizenship is in heaven. (Phil 3.7)***

A large percentage of our congregation have come to New Zealand from overseas.

Some will have student or work visas, some will have been granted permanent residency and others may have become citizens. Some will be waiting news – unsure of their status in NZ.

Others of you were born here.

Irrespective of our earthly citizenship, those who trust in Jesus for their salvation have citizenship in heaven.

I want you to hold on to this idea of citizenship in heaven for a moment – we will come back to it.

I have just completed my study leave looking at cross-cultural churches in Auckland.

Living in this city you cannot help but notice the diversity here. Auckland is super diverse.

You might have read recently in the paper that Auckland is more diverse than London and New York. In fact there are only two cities in the world which are more diverse than Auckland. Do you know what they are?

One is Brussels. I don't know for certain but I suspect it is because it is the seat of the European parliament. The other is **Dubai** because it has many foreign labourers.

Next on the list is Auckland.

When I began my study leave it was announced that NZ had broken the record of migrants with a net gain of almost 70,000 people in the year to date. Just eight weeks later as I was completing my leave that new record had been broken and there are is now a net gain of over 70,000 people.

One way or another we are meeting, talking with, seeing and encountering people who have a very different cultural background from ourselves.

So I have been thinking about people from different cultures arriving in NZ, trying to learn about our culture.

And also the challenges we face in such a diverse city to learn about their cultures.

Added to this, all of us who are Christians need to learn about the culture of heaven, because we are citizens who will be making that our eternal home.

When God commands us, seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness – it makes me wonder what is the culture of the Kingdom of God?

Given that the Kingdom of God has come among us and has broken into this world, what changes does that make to how we live here and now? When we arrive in heaven, will we know the culture or will we suffer culture shock?

The sermon on the Mount is all about how the culture of the Kingdom of God should be changing our lives now.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall inherit the **kingdom of heaven***

*... whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the **kingdom of heaven***

And Jesus taught us to pray to God saying, ... ***your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.***

Questions – how would you describe the culture of the Kingdom of God?

What values, traits, customs, sights or sounds are part of that Kingdom culture?

If these things are part of the fabric of the Kingdom of God, what might that look like in our lives when we ... seek first the Kingdom of God, in Auckland, in Epsom or Mt Eden – wherever we live?

What will our lives, our church look like if we learn the cultural distinctives of the Kingdom of God and apply them to our lives?

I want to toss some questions into the air just so we might think about this?

What would it look like if we were seeking the kingdom of God in our **office**?

How would it effect our language, the office banter, the way we speak about others or criticise them?

What would it look like if we were seeking the Kingdom of God on the **shop floor**?

How would we approach our customers? Would it change the way we recommend products or the degree to which we push a sale? Would it have any effect on the produces we sell?

What would this focus mean in the **workshop** or the **smoko room**? What would it mean in the **school playground** or the **university lecture room**?

What would seeking the kingdom of God look like in **local government**, on it decisions made for the city and in the use of

power? Think for a moment about the swearing in of the new councillor Efeso Collins and the way his family were treated at the ceremony – how would that be different if those involved were seeking the Kingdom of God?

When seeking first the Kingdom of God, do we only seek it on Sunday mornings or do we seek it every day, do we only seek it when we are around Christians or do we seek it at home, in our work, in our schools, in our clubs, or wherever else we happen to be?

I have been paying attention to the election in the USA.

I don't normally do this they are so protracted and they have such a complex system.

A great leader must be humble so they are willing to put the needs of others first. They must be sociable so they can relate to a wide range of people. And they must have the desire to do what is best for the nation.

I really wonder if either candidate really measures up.

I have watched the debates with all the name calling and accusations. It is like an outrageous Hollywood comedy, that would be great satire if it wasn't so serious.

When many citizens of one of the strongest military powers in the world is approaching an election with the mindset of electing the lesser of two evils the world is in real trouble.

I mention this election because there will never be an election in the Kingdom of God.

It is a kingdom not a democracy.

In the Kingdom of God, Jesus is King.

He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

He is supreme and above all.

He never needs to campaign, he doesn't need to debate his policies, he owns everything, but never has to disclose his taxes, he doesn't need to do backroom deals or seek the endorsement of famous people – he is King, now and always!

What should the attitude of citizens of a kingdom, be to their King?

At least in part, it means that we subjects of the King should obey his commands.

He has commanded us to seek first his kingdom – so then we should be doing that in our lives, our homes, our schools our work, each and every day seeking first the kingdom of God! If we are seeking first his kingdom, then the rule of the King should shape us.

Another aspect of the culture of this Kingdom is righteousness

Matthew says, *seek first his kingdom and his righteousness*, This is a glaring clue highlighting a core virtue of the King and His Kingdom.

He is the righteous King of a righteous Kingdom and therefore his citizens should seek his righteousness.

This focus on righteousness takes us back to what Jesus said a little earlier in his sermon, *For I tell you that unless your righteousness **surpasses** that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.* (Mt 5:20).

The Pharisees were the most righteous people in Jewish society. They were careful about keeping the holy law given by Moses. They memorised it, they meditated on it and they spent their lives trying to apply it in the most meticulous detail.

Jesus was teaching his disciples you need to be even more righteous than the most righteous Pharisee you have ever met and if you are not righteous you won't get into heaven.

The theme of righteousness deserves a whole sermon and more to give it proper consideration, but let me simply cut to the chase.

Righteousness is being right in God's sight and measuring up to his standards of holiness, purity and godliness.

There are two key aspects of righteousness, the being and the doing, that is who we are and how we live.

Firstly, we need to be righteous,

But you and I can't be righteous ourselves.

As sinful people, living in a sinful world, we can't generate our own righteousness.

It is like being covered with mud and trying to wipe it off with even more mud. We can never achieve this ourselves.

The good news of the gospel is that when we ask Jesus to forgive us of our sin, he clothes us in his righteousness, so we may become righteous in the eyes of God.

Paul said it like this, *God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2 Co 5:21).

Righteousness is a gift God bestows on us by grace.

Because Jesus is righteous and has bestowed righteousness upon us we must give priority to seeking this righteousness.

Secondly, we must live righteously.

You might say, wait a minute John, you just said we can't be righteous ourselves, so then how can we live a righteous life? You can't become righteous by yourself, but once God gives you righteousness as a gift of grace, you, and I, must then try to live as righteous people, doing what is right in keeping with the culture of the Kingdom of God.

As Paul said, *whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—**put it into practice.** And the God of peace will be with you.* (Php 4:8-9).

We have to put all this into practice – we have to do it – we must apply it in our lives and our living.

In our work **at the hospital or clinic** – all these Kingdom of God traits should be evident in our lives.

If you are in **real-estate** the priority must be the Kingdom of God whether it is showing people around a house, renting it to them or working a deal at an auction.

I wonder what the Auckland property market would look like if all the agents, vendors, investors, bankers and everyone involved was working with the Kingdom of God as the priority? I heard recently of some **fast food outlets** manipulating the hours and shifts of their workers so they were paid a minimum wage.

Imagine if the owners, management and workers all put the kingdom of God first – then their work arrangements and contracts would be noble, pure and right.

Think about the **controversial sheep deal the government** did with a Saudi livestock importer. Auditor-General has found no evidence of corruption, but has heavily criticised government processes. Imagine if the government had been working from Kingdom priorities – no questionable deals, but an agreement that our nation could look at as noble.

In Jesus we are made righteous, and following him we should seek to live righteous lives.

How do we do this, how do we seek first and give top priority to the culture of the Kingdom of God?

If we had more time to consider the characteristics of the Kingdom of God we might identify things like:

Love

Truth

Light

Faithfulness

And Hope – to these you might add others like the great theme of God sending his Son and his son sending out disciples.

How do we seek first God's Kingdom:

Build our relationship with the King – accept Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, and get to know Him.

Follow Jesus closely, listen to him, obey him.

Read the Bible – delve into the words God has given us and we let them saturate our souls.

Come to church every Sunday, frequently and regularly to worship the king, to invite his presence among us.

Join a growth group so you can grow in:

discipleship (our relationship with Jesus Christ)

fellowship (our relationships with one another)

service (our relationship with the community)

Come to our prayer times on Thursday, Saturday or Sunday mornings, and if those times don't suit you start another prayer meeting.

Read a Christian book – we have a wide variety in our library that you can borrow or go to a Christian bookshop and buy one that interests you.

Go to a Christian seminar or take a bible course – set your heart to learn about God and his kingdom.

A life focused on the Kingdom of God and his righteousness will be quite different from a life focused on building our own little kingdoms, with self-centredness, greed, grasping at power, scoring points at other's expense – it is a different life that makes a difference.

If you were to look back over your life for the last week, or if that is too hard, look at your life yesterday – what were you seeking first or putting first in your life?

If you had to appear before a court and give an account of yourself, what was your motivation in living? What was your top priority?

If our time was assessed – does it point to kingdom living?

If our finances were audited – have we invested in the Kingdom of God?

If our words were analysed would they witness to the values of the Kingdom.

If our hearts were weighted in the balance – would our attitudes, reactions, emotions point towards the Kingdom of God?

It may not be the best way of thinking of this, but I sometimes think of our influence of the Kingdom of God being like a bubble around us, our sphere of influence.

When we gather in worship or in service all those bubbles join together into a bigger bubble, one that can cover and influence the lives of others.

I think that when we meet for mainly music we are creating a little space in which the kingdom of God exists.

A place where parents can bring their children into a fun, safe, caring environment, where the leaders lovingly care for them, setting up, interacting with the children, supporting the parents, not only when they are there, but also in prayer, taking an interest in them, helping the children enjoy the songs and movement.

That is one way our church reveals and lives out the values of the Kingdom of God.

We did the same at the light party on Monday night.

We do it at the Hymns afternoon, at soup and rolls, in our support for the food bank, and when helping Presbyterian support help children and families in need.

We will be doing it again at the new migrant's class.

All of these things and so much more, allow us to bring and express and be the Kingdom of God in Epsom and Eden.

As you go out into the day and week ahead of you, go as loyal citizens of the Kingdom of God, be faithful subjects of the king, live out of the culture of his kingdom, express the kingdom values through what you do and say.

Take the Kingdom of God with you and pray that his kingdom will come and touch the lives of all around you.

All this to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit