



## *Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador*

### *The Anglican Church of Canada*

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#### **Bishop's Sixth Pastoral Letter, February 2015**

#### **Our Church and the Kingdom of God**

Dear Friends,

This is my sixth such letter to the Diocese following our Diocesan Synod in May of 2014. As before, my words will echo themes identified at Synod. Today I want to move a bit further than before and discuss Our Church and the Kingdom of God.

I begin by offering some background information on the Kingdom of God to better understand what it was Jesus was speaking about. The Kingdom of God as described by Jesus is that place, present and future, where God reigns. Jesus was not the first to refer to such a kingdom. In the Old Testament the Kingdom of the Lord is tied to the notion that God will restore Israel. When God spoke to Moses at Sinai it was to inform Moses that the Israelites would become a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation" but in many ways still a nation among others. By the time Jesus came the Jewish people already knew something about a kingdom where God's rule was complete. However, Jesus expanded this understanding. He pushed this vision beyond a merely earthly kingdom (as wonderful as it might be under God's rule) to refer to a time of the fulfillment where all things are under God's reign. And in so doing Jesus has provided his followers with a vision that continues to animate and inspire the church with its possibilities.

"The Kingdom of God is near," Jesus proclaimed. Indeed, the central message of the Gospels is that God's Kingdom is at hand and the phrase can be found over 100 times in the New Testament. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed was very much about the primacy of God in all things. "*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...*" (Matthew 6:33). Biblical scholar Tom Wright in his book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, states that Jesus did two things: he proclaimed God's kingdom, and then he invited people to become part of it. His challenge was not simply intellectual, "Do you agree?" Rather, he pushed his listeners to make a commitment, "Will you join up?" Pope Benedict put it this way in his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*: "The core content of the Gospel is this: The Kingdom of God is at hand ... something new takes place ... And an answer to this gift is demanded ... conversion and faith." C.H. Dodd (*The Founder of Christianity*) stated that when Jesus said the

Kingdom of God was at hand he was really saying: “Here is God in all his power and majesty, confronting you where you live! What are you going to do about it?”

In the New Testament we discover that Jesus came to preach the “good news about the Kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43) although the Kingdom Jesus spoke of and the kingdom expected by the crowds were sometimes two different things. The qualities of Jesus’ kingdom far transcended that of any earthly kingdom. “My kingdom is not of this world,” said Jesus. It is a kingdom that often reverses things as they are in the world (the last become first and the first become last). In the prayer that Jesus taught, we pray that God’s Kingdom would come upon the earth as it is in heaven.

The parables were Jesus’ preferred way of teaching and in my opinion are our best windows into the Kingdom of God. William Barclay called the parables earthly stories with heavenly meanings. I love the way the *Godly Play* program approaches the parables as presents from God (contained in gold gift boxes) that we each open for ourselves (a bit of do-it-yourself learning!). *Godly Play* also describes the parables as “the most authentic voice of Jesus” giving us a “glimpse of the kingdom.” While it may be argued that not all of the parables Jesus taught referred directly to the Kingdom of God, it is fair to say that the stories awakened in his hearers an awareness of a new space, a new time, a new way, where God’s rule, God’s love, was complete, or at least coming into completion. Joachim Jeremias (*Rediscovering the Parables*) has written that the parables are “all full of ‘the secret of the Kingdom of God’ (Mark 4:11) ... the certainty that the messianic age is dawning.” In the parables I hear Jesus say, “This is what happens when God rules!” In that sense, Jesus’ parables had echoes of the Kingdom within them. I understand the Kingdom of God as not just some future perfected state where God’s rule is complete but also a very present reality in which we encounter God’s reign in great ways in and in little ways. The Kingdom of God is that place where God reigns.

I will group the parables into three types: **God’s Love for us**, **God’s Ways for us**, and **God’s Plan for us**. There are many ways to organize the parables but this grouping is my way and lends itself to this pastoral letter. My review of the parables here will be cursory at best and I will not explore any in depth but provide examples of a selected few for my purposes here (there are over 30 in total). If you have the time I suggest that you review on your own each of the parables cited.

Firstly, the parables speak of **God’s Love for us** and also God’s concern for the lost. I include here the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:4-7), the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the Loving Father/Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32).

Secondly, the parables speak of **God’s Ways for us**. I include here parables that speak to the value we place on eternal things like the Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44) and the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45-46). We should practice humility and obedience toward God as in the story of the Unworthy Servant (Luke 17:7-10), the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14), and the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Forgiveness should also characterize our treatment of others as in the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35).

Thirdly, the parables speak of **God’s Plan for us** in Christ’s Return and the Final Judgment. Jesus speaks of God’s love as seemingly universal although he did not say that all would enter the Kingdom. Here I include the Dragnet (Matthew 13:47-50), the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30), the Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14) and the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13).

As even the most casual reading of the parables of Jesus will show, they speak to both the present and the future: a transformed present and a perfected future. Their power lies in casting a renewed vision of both under the reign of God. They stir us in the present and give us hope for the future with their power to inspire and shape. In our church today we do well to hold before us the imagination of these stories because they were spoken to and recorded by a living community in the first place, intended to shape an active church. Their power to stimulate, correct and heal is immense. Rather than looking at them from the outside, Jesus invites us to step inside the parables. They are very much invitations to go deeper into our faith.

It is important for us in the church today to hold Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God before us in our work and planning. That vision, in a very powerful and sometimes uncomfortable way can help us test our goals and ambitions as Christians to see if they are in line with what Jesus taught. Our church on earth is an outpost of the Kingdom of God and the place where we practice the ways of God's Kingdom on each other. By holding the vision of the kingdom before us we have a model that should shape and influence the People of God through the ages. Over the years I have found myself in meetings and gatherings where I really felt that the light of God's Kingdom was shining through in a fresh vision and inspired decision-making. Sadly, I have sometimes found the opposite where the work that people were engaged in came nowhere near the Kingdom of God and where their own narrow and limited vision had replaced the vision of God's reign. When religion is about protecting the past as we remember it rather than walking closely with God into the future we have already lost our way. As I stated at Synod, when we replace the purposes of God with local, historical human ideals we are guilty of idolatry.

We might sometimes believe that little bit of our church we can see now is all there is but the Kingdom of God inspires us to dream of so much more. The vision of the kingdom given to us by Jesus is nothing less than an invitation to dream and to dream big! The church should reflect the Kingdom of God ("on earth as it is in heaven") and intentionally model itself upon that vision. It is important for us to ask where the kingdom is being realized in our church today and what would happen if our church reflected the Kingdom of God in all that it did? The Kingdom of God is that place where God reigns.

I conclude with a couple of prayers that I have used for a long time now and which continue to inspire me. More than once over the years they have been used to begin Annual Meetings. I pass them on now in the hopes that they may inspire us all in our journey toward the Kingdom:

*May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,  
so that we may live deep within our hearts.*

*May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war,  
so that we may reach out hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.*

*And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world,  
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.*

*Disturb us, O Lord when we are too well-pleased with ourselves  
when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, because we sailed too close to the shore.  
Disturb us, O Lord when with the abundance of things we possess,  
we have lost our thirst for the water of life when, having fallen in love with time,*

*we have ceased to dream of eternity and in our efforts to build a new earth,  
we have allowed our vision of your Kingdom to grow dim.  
Stir us, O Lord to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas where storms show Thy mastery,  
where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.  
In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes and invited the brave to follow.*

My next such letter to you will be sent in March and will be called **Our Church and the Marks of Mission**.

With my every blessing,  
+Geoff