



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 29th January 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

Matthew chapter 18:1-35

The Upside-Down Kingdom

Introduction: The Surprises and the Links

We have a large chunk of Jesus' teaching before us tonight, and I want to let you in on a couple of secrets of my preparation for preaching on a passage like this: I start by assuming that God is a perfect communicator; and that His mind is bigger than my mind; and that He never wastes a word; and therefore that I am going to have to work hard sometimes to understand Him. In particular, I need to look out for the surprises and the puzzles (the things that don't quite make sense at first sight), and for the links, the thoughts that connect one passage to another, because I assume they are not random; and so, if they appear random to me, that is my problem, and I need to address it. I gather from various comments that I did not do this very well last week; and for that, I apologise. I am going to try to do better this week, in showing you the surprises and the connecting links.

So, first, I was surprised to realise that this is not a passage about children. Jesus used a little child as an illustration in verses 2-4, but from then on He was talking about His followers, Christians, when He used the terms '*little child*' or '*little ones*'. And therefore, second, the passage is all about relations between Christians. That's what links it together. But I don't want you to switch off when you hear that, if you are not yet a Christian believer yourself.

I became a Christian 38 years ago on Tuesday week (February 7th 1968), because I wanted to change the world. My generation was the protest generation (and you might not believe that to look at us now). It was a time of great student turmoil. The student newspaper at my first university quoted John Lennon, addressing student demonstrators: 'You say that in order to change the world we've got to understand what's wrong with the world. And then—destroy it. Ruthlessly. You're obviously on a destruction kick. I'll tell you what's wrong with it—People—so, do you want to destroy them? Ruthlessly? Until you/we change your/our heads, there's no chance. Tell me of one successful revolution! Who blanked up [you'll understand that is my own euphemism, which I have inserted for Mr Lennon's obscenity to save your blushes—and mine.] Who blanked up communism—Christianity—capitalism—Buddhism, etc? Sick heads and nothing else. Do you think all the enemy wear capitalist badges so you can shoot them?' Well, he had a point. To change the world, I've got to change my own heart. And I had found that I couldn't do that. But Jesus could. So I asked Him to take over my life, to start inside me.

And then the change has got to work on the small scale. It has got to be seen to be working between Christian believers if the rest of the world is going to believe that Christianity is relevant for the whole human race. The multi-millionaire philanthropist, who gives huge sums to charity and adopts all sorts of benevolent causes, but who is on his third marriage, and who is not on speaking terms with most of his children—we know he does not have the secret to change the world, because he clearly cannot make it work at home. It must work within me and within all my most intimate relationships. And Christianity does. So even if you are not yet a believer tonight, please listen to what Jesus said about the intimate relations in His Upside-Down Kingdom.

1) The Statusless Kingdom

(vv 1-5)

It is the Statusless Kingdom, as we see from verses 1-4: *At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter*

the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. It was not the qualities of childhood (innocence, purity, simplicity or dependence) to which Jesus referred, but to the child's lack of status (which would have been even clearer in the ancient world than it is in our culture): *Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven* (v 4). Not 'whoever humbles himself like this child humbles him/herself'—but 'down to the level of this child.' Children are not actually naturally humble. By and large, as soon as they are capable of pride, they exercise it. But they do lack status.

Notice those 3 words in verse 3: *unless you change...* God's Kingdom demands change, even in those of us who already have an innocent, sweet and humble nature, because it is a change of status. We go from the top of the pile to the bottom. Samuel Johnson once said, 'No two men shall be half an hour together, but one shall acquire an evident superiority over the other'. How true that is of normal human interaction (including women)! But not in God's Kingdom. It is not about being one up, establishing my superiority—by my intellect, or by my wealth, or my marital status, or my career, my wit, or my family, or experience, or by my children, or even by my righteousness. It is an upside-down kingdom, without status for anyone.

So how do you and I feel about being called '*a little one*'? "*And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me*" (v 5). This is not an invitation to become a Christian Primary School Reception class teacher. Jesus was speaking metaphorically: '*a little child like this*' means a child in the metaphorical sense He had explained in the verse before i.e. a believer. Earlier in this gospel He had spoken of giving a cup of cold water "*to one of these little ones because he is my disciple*" (10:42). And it was a term he would use again for those who believed in Him (in chap 25). So how do I feel about that? In God's Kingdom, I am a little one. There are no others, only little ones, in that kingdom. You see, when I was converted, I was not just converted from one enthusiasm to another, and from one set of opinions to another, but from a high opinion of myself to a low opinion of myself. That is how I have to see myself.

But there is opposition to this kingdom—

2) Enemies of the Kingdom

(vv 5-9)

"*And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me*" (v 5). Jesus is the key to the Kingdom. He is represented in every believer. "*But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea*" (v 6). This is not about tempting members of the Sunday school. The Greek word translated *causes...to sin* means literally 'stumbles' or 'puts a stumbling block in the way of' and we will get the sense better if we render it as 'makes belief difficult': Anyone who makes belief difficult for a believer, "*it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea*" (v 6b). "*Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!* [things that make belief difficult] *Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell*" (vv 7-9). The stakes are that high. The battle to believe is intense—we are vulnerable because difficulties will arise from what other people think and say and from within ourselves. Nobody here tonight is not vulnerable. What do I need to go on believing through this coming week? I need God's word telling me what is at stake (life or the fire of hell); I need the encouragement of other believers (you); and above all I need the grace of God. And that grace is available, because it is His Kingdom.

3) Whose Kingdom? It is God's Kingdom.

(vv 10-14)

To understand the kingdom, we have to understand the character of the king. He is a king to Whom every one of His subjects has immediate and permanent access: "*See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven*" (v 10). When we come to Christ the barrier between us and God is destroyed forever. And it is God's will that brings the kingdom into being, and that holds it together: "*What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and*

one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (vv 12-14). Believers here tonight did not get here just under our own volition. The will that upholds the universe undergirds our faith and calls us together. Is that a reassurance to you? There is another will besides your own willing you to heaven.

And the nature and will of the king must direct the behaviour of His subjects, so

4) Maintaining the Kingdom... in His way (vv 15-20)

This passage has implications for church discipline—how in a fellowship of believers we are to treat a flagrant sinner—but its primary concern is pastoral: how to win over the sinner: *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'* *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector*" (vv 15-17). It is all to be done for his sake, that he may come to his senses. Once again, the stakes are high: these are eternal issues: *"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"* (v 18).

Do you remember *Gladiator*? What was it Russell Crowe said to his followers? "What we do in life echoes in eternity". I've no idea what that meant in the context of that excellent film. But for the Christian, what we do on earth certainly affects eternity. We may think it is a little spat between two believers. But it is vast. Is there someone here tonight you try to avoid, you hope not to speak to, against whom you have a grudge? Heed Russell Crowe: What we do on earth echoes in eternity.

"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (v 19). You see, in this context, that is not so much a universal promise about prayer, as a declaration about the involvement of God in the relationships between believers: *"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them"* (v 20). How the believers here in this building now relate to one another matters to God. Our relationships reveal Him to the world. In fact, there may be an unbeliever or two here tonight who is beginning to experience that; as I did 38 years ago, when as an unbeliever I found there was something about the way Christians treated each other, which I had experienced nowhere else. It made God real to me: *"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them"* (v 20).

So, finally—

5) The kingdom of Forgiveness (vv 21-35)

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (vv21-22) and to make His point, Jesus told that story: *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him"* (vv 23-24). That was an astronomic sum, like the GNP of a small kingdom: *"Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded"* (vv 25-28). That may sound unnaturally savage considering his own debt was 600,000 times greater, until we remember that this man had just had the financial fright of his life, and he had clearly resolved to tighten up on his finances all round and call in all his loans (just as his bank manager would have advised him to).

“His fellow-servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’”(vv 29-32a). *“You wicked servant”*—not wicked for getting into debt, but wicked for failing to respond to mercy with mercy: *he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart”* (vv 32b-35). Forgiveness is not a qualification for the Kingdom: it is the Kingdom. It is the very stuff of the Christian life. And it has to flow.

It is like receiving a river as a gift. (I know this is a rather far-fetched analogy). But if I am given a river, I can’t stop it flowing. I can’t hold on to its water, or I have turned it into a lake, a stagnant pond, and it is not a river anymore. A river has to flow. And so does forgiveness. We cannot receive it without giving it. It has to flow out. John Wesley once pleaded with a commanding officer to forgive one of his soldiers who had been convicted of a criminal offence. The commanding officer said bluntly, “I never forgive”. To which Wesley replied, “Then, I hope you never sin”. *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart”* (v 35).

Perhaps someone here tonight is struggling to forgive someone: perhaps a close relative, a parent even; or an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend; or an ex-husband or wife; someone else in the fellowship. If it is a struggle, remember the debt we owe God. 600,000 times greater. Ponder that forgiveness, and let it flow again. We must forgive one another. It is what the kingdom is all about.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)