

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

I was not surprised when *The King's Speech* took four of the top Academy Awards this year. *The King's Speech* is the inspiring true story of King George VI of England, who ascended to the throne somewhat unexpectedly after his older brother Edward abdicated. Suddenly “Bertie,” as he was known to his family, is thrust into the limelight. With that limelight came the obligation of live radio broadcasts – a nightmare for a king who stammered.

Just before he was to address the nation after Parliament declared war on Germany, Bertie laments his lack of power. As king, he cannot levy a tax. He cannot form a government. He isn't even the proper authority to declare a war. Frankly, the king notes, his only role is to speak on behalf of his nation – and with his stammer, he feels he cannot even do that. Previous speeches have been disasters, as people have looked away in embarrassment and confusion.

But fortunately, the king has a friend in speech therapist Lionel Logue. Some years earlier, their paths crossed when the king's wife hired Lionel to do what no one else seemed able to do: help her husband overcome his stammer. And Lionel was able to do so because he saw what no one else including the king saw. They all saw a king with a stammer. Lionel saw a man of wit, intelligence and determination that would make him into an exceptional king.

And because Lionel had that vision of what King George could be, the king began to see himself in that light. And as he sat before the microphone that night on the eve of war, with Lionel standing before him for encouragement, the king spoke slowly, but he spoke clearly, with power and authority that rallied his nation for the tough days ahead of them all.

When we speak about the kingdom of heaven, we may find ourselves trying to sell others on the idea of a king with a stammer: A kingdom that in this world anyway seems imperfect.

“Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” We pray this every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer – and yet, I don’t believe many of us see that kingdom fulfilled on earth at this time.

A kingdom that is now and not yet: This is the vision we as Christians share even though our immediate circumstances are telling us we’re not there yet. We need to be able to look beyond this world to the one that is to come, and then to live it in ways that we become like the previews at the movies: we provide others with glimpses of the kingdom of heaven.

Remember Jesus’ first sermon? He was in his hometown synagogue, where he read Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And after reading these words, Jesus sat down and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

And from that beginning, Jesus focused his deeds and much of his message on the kingdom of heaven, especially in the parables. I suspect almost everyone knows either the Parable of the Prodigal Son and/or the Good Samaritan. Those are my two favorites, and both pretty obviously revolve around the issue of God’s love for us and our love for neighbor.

But love was not the most frequent topic of Jesus’ stories. Of the 52 parables told by him, fully a third of them say something about the kingdom of heaven. Two Sundays ago, we talked about how the kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing seed. Today, we have six short stories that provide glimpses of God’s kingdom – and more importantly, what we as disciples should expect if we are to help make that kingdom a reality.

The first thing Jesus says is that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. Anyone here can their own pickles? If so, you’ve seen mustard seed – and yet, even what we use

commercially is bigger than the seed used in Israel. Yet as Jesus indicated, the smallest of seeds grows into a plant large enough for birds to settle in its branches.

Interpretation: Never underestimate the value of small beginnings. Jesus is the lone person preaching the kingdom, and so his disciples must have wondered what impact they would have. And yet, like a mustard seed, from the initial 12 we have grown into an estimated 2.2 billion Christians in today's world.

The next parable about yeast seems to simply be an echo of the mustard seed parable. Put just a pinch of yeast in with other ingredients, and the result is an intense multiplication of that substance. Like the mustard seed, the point seems to be that something small can lead to big results. However, broaden that idea just a little. If we mix the basic ingredients of bread without yeast, we get a cracker. Yeast is what changes the texture to a spongy, soft interior. In the same way, the kingdom of God should have a transforming effect upon our lives.

One other note about something these first two stories have in common. To the Jews, a mustard seed was a weed and yeast was a symbol of corruption. Since both have that negative connotation, Jesus' words could be interpreted to mean the kingdom of God might offend people. Imagine that – the church's purpose might be to occasionally offend people.

The first time I saw *The King's Speech*, I didn't fully appreciate how offensive Lionel was to the king because I'm unfamiliar with the protocol of meeting with royalty. As I watched the movie again this week on DVD, I better realized how often Lionel offended "his majesty" by calling him "Bertie" and even sitting upon the throne.

The effect, however, was exactly what Lionel wanted. The king was so shocked and outraged that for a moment, he forgot his fear. He forgot he was a man with a stammer. Instead, he was moved to voice his outrage to this impudent subject and he did so without any stammer.

If we as the church go back to Jesus' purpose on earth, we will find ourselves dealing with the blind, the lame, the sick, the outcast and the poor. And we are likely to offend a few people when we do so, especially when we declare the kingdom of heaven was meant for persons such as these.

And that's OK. If offense at what we do and say causes the world to get past its momentary fears, then we have accomplished exactly what Jesus intended for us to be as part of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

And after all, isn't that the only thing we're supposed to be seeking? That's the point of the next two parables. A man working in a field finds a treasure. One of the easiest transitions I had moving here was the fact that Huntington Bank has branches both in Reed City and Boyne City. With just a change of address, our assets up north became our assets down here.

In Palestine, there were no banks. The best place to keep your money or valuables safe was in a hole in the ground. Of course, the danger was you'd forget where you buried something, or there would be a war that removed a generation or two from a property so the memory of its treasure was lost. It was not uncommon for someone to be plowing or excavating and come across money, jewels or other assets buried in the ground. And the rule was, finders keepers – so the worker was free to buy the property, knowing the treasure would instantly become his.

As for pearls, they were considered the loveliest of possessions in the ancient world. The pearl merchant would have dealt with a number of pearls of varying color and size, but there would have come the day when the man would find a pearl of infinite worth and value. And because he would recognize it for what it was, he'd be willing to sell everything else he possessed – all of the other pearls – in order to possess the finest one he had ever seen.

That's how it is with the kingdom of heaven – we should be willing to let go of everything else in our lives to possess the kingdom because its value outweighs anything else we could possibly own.

And it doesn't matter whether we are like the worker in the field who unexpectedly finds the kingdom, or we're like the merchant who has been spending his life in search of it. Either way, we should recognize immediately that the kingdom is ours if we are willing to lay aside all else that we have in order to claim it.

I think that's why these four parables are followed by the fifth in verses 47-50. Lest we be lulled into thinking we have an easy or always joyful task, the fifth parable completely changes our mood. The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea.

Fishermen in Jesus' day wouldn't just cast out a line or two for fish. Most often, they threw out huge nets that wrapped around everything within its boundaries. At the end of the day, the fishermen would sit down and go through the day's catch, keeping the good fish and tossing out the bad. And so, the kingdom of God is like a net in which a variety of people are caught. And at the end of the time, God will sort out the good from the bad.

I know a lot of people, including good Christians, who would prefer that we not talk about a Judgment Day. First of all, they claim it's a downer. But even more, they would say that with our new psychology and sociology, we have come to see that what is right for one person might not be right for another. Surely God will simply allow all persons a free ticket into heaven, if He is the loving God they think he is.

God is a God of love, even of the prodigal son who comes home in rags. And it is clear from scripture that Jesus was the only perfect human in this world. If heaven were only for perfect people, it would be a pretty lonely place.

And yet, Jesus includes the fifth parable about the net to make sure we understand discipleship is not some trivial pursuit; it is a matter of life and death – ours. We as the Church are not to judge who is good or who is bad, because we are the fish, not the fisherman. Several places in the Bible, it is clear only God will stand over us as a judge at the end times.

Therefore, we as the church must be open to gather in all who will come. Our net must be open to persons who sing off key; persons who have body piercings; persons from every economic status; persons who may not fit our ideal of what a disciple is. Our duty is not to choose who comes into the net; we are to just make sure we throw a big net, and allow the true fisher of people to judge what to do with us.

After all of these stories, Jesus shares one last one. There's a lot of debate over what Jesus meant, but most commentators would agree with how Eugene Peterson interprets verse 52 in *The Message*: "Then you see how every student well-trained in God's kingdom is like the owner of a general store who can put his hands on anything you need, old or new, exactly when you need it."

The kingdom of heaven was nothing new to Jesus' disciples. They had heard of it through the law and the prophets in scripture. Jesus wasn't asking his disciples to forget all they had heard before; rather, he was encouraging them to understand it in a new light.

In the same way, for us to have a clear vision of the kingdom of God, we must have a vital faith that is current and forward looking. God never intends for us to forget all we knew before we came to God, but rather to see that vision in the new light of his message.

What is the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a treasure, a pearl, a net, like knowledge old and new. The kingdom of God is now and not yet.

And it is our goal, on earth as it is in heaven.