

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 52”

Matthew 18:1-9

We're into the holiday period now and many people will be travelling off to other places for a bit of rest and recreation. The majority will be going to somewhere fairly familiar to sit on the beach or walk in the mountains or visit the monuments and landmarks. But some adventurous souls who find all the usual stuff boring and have the resources to do something a bit different will be setting out for countries and areas where the terrain and the culture are totally alien to us here. The way of life will be quite distinctive, the social mores very strange to us, the climate – meteorological, political and economic – completely unlike anything we're used to.

The band of friends whose progress we've been tracking through Matthew's Gospel over the past months are also finding life a bit challenging now they've followed the Kingly Messiah, Jesus, over the border into the Kingdom of God. Jesus is now setting out on the final part of his journey to his destiny in Jerusalem, so for three years he has been trying to explain to his disciples what the Kingdom of God is like. It's a Kingdom – a locus of God's sovereignty and rule – that is already starting to take shape. It's been foretold by the prophets, poets and preachers of the Old Testament, who have tried, in their own limited way, to describe what life will be like as God returns things to the state he originally intended them to be in before evil, selfishness and sin had perverted and distorted his perfect creation.

Not only has Jesus been talking about this Kingdom and offering little hints about it in his parables and stories, in the debates and discussion he has had with the curious and the critical, but he has also been giving little glimpses of what to expect as he has healed and exorcised, as he has offered hope and peace, as he has demonstrated unconditional love and transforming grace. He has overturned people's preconceptions and prejudices, and has shown that there is more to life than trying to keep man-made rules and regulations. He has held out the promise of true liberty and eternal fulfilment.

And his disciples are keen to find out more about this Kingdom. After all, their experience of life in a kingdom has been shaped and moulded by their own culture and by the values and attitudes of a world that is still deeply affected by the presence of sin. So they ask Jesus about one of the aspects of this Kingdom that is clearly high on their agenda. The translation we've used (and most others, really) don't translate the first word in the sentences, which is one of those words which every language has and which are so difficult to find a good way of translating. I suppose we might read it as, “*So, who's the greatest in this Kingdom then?*” They live in a society where status and hierarchy are quite important – as do we – so they're keen to see how that will work in the Kingdom of God. After all, it might mean they get to move a few rungs up the ladder.

So Jesus takes the opportunity to let them know that things are going to be different in the Kingdom of God. As we've already said, Jesus has told them quite a bit so far about life in the Kingdom and he takes the opportunity here in chapter 18 to talk about **relationships** in the Kingdom. As we read through it over the next couple of weeks, we'll see that this is all about how we get on together in the Kingdom. And it begins, as so often, with a reminder that we're talking about a different perspective completely from the one we're used to. The Kingdom has a very different set of values, a quite distinctive world-view. At root, there is a totally new set of attitudes which we need to adopt if we are to make any sense of the Kingdom and if we are to get the best that we can out of it.

This isn't intended as a defence of our studies in Matthew's Gospel, more of an explanation, but when we had an opportunity recently to discuss our Sunday services, one comment that came back was that we don't have any practical, topical teaching any more. Well, quite apart from the view that you can't get much more practical and topical than the Bible, we need to remember – as we've noted so many times – that following King Jesus is about transforming our attitudes rather than modifying our behaviour. As Pavlov found out with his dogs and Skinner with his rats, you can encourage the right behaviour with a bowl of dog food and a bell, or with a cattle prod, but that's not the way of the Kingdom. Until you've sorted out your attitudes, you're not going to get very far with living as Jesus calls us to.

And Jesus sets out some of that here. You're not going to get your head round the way relationships happen in the Kingdom of God until you are prepared to change your own attitudes. Status is a pretty good place to start, it seems, because the way we rank one another in our daily lives says a lot about our relationship to those people. As the disciples, basically, ask Jesus what's in it for them as far as moving up the hierarchy is concerned, he calls a child over and uses it as an object lesson. I say "it" because there's no indication from Matthew if it's a boy or a girl. Children were referred to as "it", which might give you a hint as to the way they were regarded in the society of Jesus' time. Until they reached puberty and could do something useful like producing more children or helping in the family business, they were seen as having no value. In Roman, Greek or Hebrew culture, children were not only not heard, but not even seen most of the time. Of course, their mothers loved them, but until they reached the age of 12 or thereabouts and could contribute economically or reproductively to the life of the community, they were a barely tolerated cause of interference.

We don't know the age of this child, but Matthew refers to it as a "*little child*". In my mind's eye, I've always seen it as around five years old, but there's no real indication here. Whatever age the child is, it exemplifies the point Jesus is trying to make. "Look," he says, "if you're worried about status and hierarchy, who's going to be top dog and all that, have a look at this child and realise that you're going to need a new set of attitudes – new attitudes towards **status**, towards **others**, and towards **sin**." Then he

goes on to explain what he means in the next few sentences, some of which are pretty stark in their message. Let's have a brief look at what he says here.

1. STATUS

Jesus tells his disciples that they are to “*change and become like little children*” if they want any part of the Kingdom of God. Eugene Peterson translates that in *The Message* as, “*return to square one and start over like children.*” Some people have said that this is all to do with innocence and selflessness, but anyone who has spent more than a couple of seconds with a small child will know that innocence and selflessness are not qualities which immediately spring to mind! This is all about status, about a place in the pecking order.

You see, a little child does have that innate selfishness which seems to characterise fallen humanity. The child always seems to be needing something, wanting something, trying to be the centre of attention. But there's no sense of hierarchy or of status in a young child's worldview. A young child may have faults, but that child is as yet unaffected by the world's values, hasn't yet worked out where he or she is in the rankings. Now, I'm sure those of you who have studied Piaget and all the early years development stuff will try to disabuse me of that notion, but I think the point Jesus is making is that we need that apparently innocent – or perhaps naive – attitude to our place in the world. It's only the later experiences of the child that instil in it a sense of status.

There are all kinds of books and films about young children from different social classes, ethnic backgrounds, economic groups who are great friends when they're very small and grow apart as they realise that their families are at different places on the spectrum of status. Bertolucci's *1900* is one of the best films about that (if you can bear sitting through six hours of the director's unsubtle preaching). And you see it in the examples of children who speak very directly to grown-ups to whom everyone else defers because of their rank.

Jesus is saying that his followers need to have the same attitude to status as a small child, a kind of innocent lack of awareness, a sense that you're worth something just by virtue of being a child of God. But also an awareness that your status in the Kingdom comes only because of that, only because of the grace of God – not because you have more money, qualifications, resources, talents than others. Have a proper view of yourself, he is saying – loved by God but no better than anyone else, because God loves us all.

2. OTHERS

And that, of course, leads into the second point he makes (in vv5,6). If the children of God are effectively like “*little ones*”, then what Jesus says here applies to everyone. Pretty well all commentators are agreed that Jesus is now talking about all those who follow him, especially as the Greek word Matthew uses for “*little child*” here can also refer to the followers of a particular teacher, who were often called “*children*” or “*sons*” of the teacher, or to beginners in the faith. We might translate this as “*little people*”. They are all to be welcomed – and it will be just like welcoming Jesus himself.

It’s easy, isn’t it, to concentrate on welcoming the rich, the powerful, the showy, the educated. We like to bask in their reflected glory. And we love dropping names, don’t we – the names of the famous, the celebrated, the well-known. When new people come into church, we find that the attractive, the well-dressed, the eloquent or the amusing are the ones people want to talk to. Those who don’t look quite so attractive or who are not as well dressed or who seem to have a few problems are often left alone. When we’re looking for people to fulfil particular roles, we often overlook the little people. But there really is no place in the Kingdom of God for that kind of discrimination.

And it doesn’t mean that the rich or the supposedly higher class people are any better than anyone else. Listen to this extract from an article which I found in an American Journal a couple of years ago.

While the poor might seem to have the most reason to cheat and steal, the rich are more likely to be dishonest, a new study shows.

In a series of experiments, University of California at Berkeley researchers showed again and again that upper-class individuals were more prone to unethical behaviour than people from more deprived backgrounds, according to the study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Paul Piff, a doctoral candidate and the study’s lead author, says he was surprised at how little incentive it took to get high-income people to cheat.

In one study, for example, people were asked to play a game of chance online. The 195 volunteers were told that a die would be rolled for them five times and that the participants with the highest scores from the five rolls would get more credits toward a drawing for a \$50 Amazon.com certificate. The researchers also told the volunteers to keep track of their own scores.

But Piff and his colleagues had designed the game so all players would end up with a score of 12. As it turns out, “the upper socio-economic status people were way more likely to report a score above 12,” says Piff.

“It was fairly remarkable,” he added. “You wouldn’t think that people reporting incomes of \$150,000 per year would be so motivated to win this prize.”

In a second, related, experiment, Piff and his colleagues again watched drivers -- this time to see whether people with expensive vehicles were more likely to breeze past pedestrians in a crosswalk. In California, vehicles are supposed to yield when someone is in the crosswalk. Once again, drivers of expensive cars were more likely to behave badly.

And Jesus says that his disciples should not discriminate in this way as it will rub off on the “*little ones*” and they will start to sin by thinking in terms of status. That’s just perpetuating the problem and it would be better if people thinking that way were dropped into the deepest part of the sea with “*a large millstone*” round their neck. The “*large millstone*” was the one that could be turned only by a donkey, so this was a punishment that was pretty serious! As we’ve said already – and as Paul repeatedly makes clear in his Letters later in the New Testament – we are all accepted in Christ. There is absolutely no need for any kind of show of status. Be aware of your own worth and that of those around you. Don’t allow your attitudes towards wealth, power, education and so on to affect your relationships with anyone else in the Kingdom of God.

3. SIN

Now this attitude of discrimination, of arrogance, of pride is at root sinful, says Jesus. I can’t remember whose election slogan it was, but one of the parties campaigned a few years back on the platform, “*Tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime*”. Jesus is here talking about sin and the causes of sin, about sinful behaviour and the attitudes which underlie that sinful behaviour. You need to have an attitude that takes sin seriously. Now that doesn’t go down too well these days. “Sin” is not a word that people like to hear. Nor is it a concept that we like to embrace, especially in a day and age when the blame can always be shifted on to someone else (if you can afford a good enough lawyer).

Jesus uses some pretty graphic imagery here – lopping off or gouging out the bits that are causing the problem. If you’ve ever seen that classic black & white B-movie *The Man With X-Ray Eyes*, you’ll remember that the climax of the film is the man stumbling into a tent meeting where the preacher is preaching from this text and doing exactly that! Jesus is employing some more of that hyperbole here to make his point. If we took it literally, there wouldn’t be many of us left.

What he’s saying is that we need to deal with the actual temptations before we get into sinning, to deal with the underlying attitudes. Don’t allow yourself to get into situations where you know you are weak. It’s your feet that carry you into those places you know you will be tempted. It’s your hands that will be doing the things that are going to lead you into carrying out sinful actions. It’s your eyes that will be looking at the things that will lead you into situations where you will be allowing lust or covetousness to take over. Put a lock on the Internet, change your route through the office building, don’t walk down the drinks aisle at the supermarket, find a way of avoiding the bookmaker – increasingly difficult in most towns – if that’s where your temptation lies. Train yourself to think before you open your mouth in anger

or in obscenity. Ask God to help you change your attitudes that can so easily lead you into wrong patterns of behaviour.

So, Jesus tells his followers, if you want to be a part of the Kingdom of God, if you want to enjoy the benefits of living under the sovereignty of God, then you've got to change your attitudes. Start thinking like a small child. Start all over again, as if you have not been influenced by the pressure of the world around you with its hierarchies and pecking orders, its competitiveness and self-centredness. Have a bit of humility, as Jesus did himself (*Philippians 2:8* – “*He humbled himself ...*”) and recognise the value and worth in other people. Take seriously the way you react to people, who are all objects of God's grace, just as you are. And take seriously those things that will lead you into sin, into behaving in a way that is totally at odds with the values and expectations of the Kingdom of God. It's a verse we've quoted many, many times, but once again it's appropriate here: “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (*Romans 12:2*).

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The disciples ask Jesus about one of the aspects of the Kingdom of God that is clearly high on their agenda: "So, who's the greatest in this Kingdom then?" They live in a society where status and hierarchy are quite important – as do we – so they're keen to see how that will work in the Kingdom of God. And Jesus takes the opportunity to let them know that things are going to be different in the Kingdom of God. At root, there is a totally new set of attitudes which we need to adopt if we are to make any sense of the Kingdom and if we are to get the best that we can out of it.

Jesus calls a child over and uses it as an object lesson. Until a child could contribute economically or reproductively to the life of the community, they were a barely tolerated cause of interference. Jesus says that his followers are going to need a new set of attitudes – new attitudes towards **status**, towards **others**, and towards **sin**. Then he goes on to explain what he means in the next few sentences, some of which are pretty stark in their message.

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2. OTHERS

If the children of God are effectively like "*little ones*", then what Jesus says here applies to everyone. We might translate this as "*little people*". They are all to be welcomed – and it will be just like welcoming Jesus himself. When new people come into church, we find that the attractive, the well-dressed, the eloquent or the amusing are the ones people want to talk to. Those who don't look quite so attractive or who are not as well dressed or who seem to have a few problems are often left alone. When we're looking for people to fulfil particular roles, we often overlook the little people. But there really is no place in the Kingdom of God for that kind of discrimination.

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Jesus is here talking about sin and the causes of sin, about sinful behaviour and the attitudes which underlie that sinful behaviour. You need to have an attitude that takes sin seriously. Jesus uses some pretty graphic imagery here – lopping off or gouging out the bits that are causing the problem. But what he's saying is that we need to deal with the actual temptations before we get into sinning, to deal with the underlying attitudes. Don't allow yourself to get into situations where you know you are weak.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think we are so obsessed with rank and hierarchy? How does that show itself in a church?
2. What qualities of a child do you think Jesus wants his followers to adopt? What is the difference between "childish" and "childlike"?
3. How could we make our church more welcoming to everyone?
4. How do you deal with temptation in areas where you know you are weak and vulnerable?
5. How can we all show true humility in our daily lives?
6. Why are attitudes so important? Look at *Romans 12:2* and talk about what it might mean for you. What are **you** going to do about it?