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| HYMNS: | 25 | “God is here! As we his people” |
| | 154 | “Come, divine interpreter” |
| | 255 | “The Kingdom of God” |
| | 254 | “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God” |

READINGS: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17
Mark 4:26-34

“WHERE ON EARTH IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?”

Today, as we are seated here, a barge is travelling down the Thames from Hurley in Berkshire to Runnymede in Surrey. Tomorrow it will arrive at Runnymede – 800 years to the day that Magna Carta (Great Charter) was signed by King John under pressure from his barons and bishops. A copy of the Charter is on board that barge.

There are four copies of the Charter – each is just a bit smaller than this A3 sheet of paper that I am holding and full of small writing. Why all this fuss and celebration about a small piece of paper? Because this was the first time in the history of this country that the basic rights of people, or at least those with some education and status, were written down. It was stated in the Charter that no-one was above the law – even the King, that there were limits on taxation and that everyone had the right to a fair trial. This Charter did not solve all the nation’s problems but it did put down a marker especially that Kings could no longer act just as they wished.

Three clauses of Magna Carta are still enshrined in English law – i) guaranteeing the liberties of the English Church ii) guarding the privileges of the City of London and other large towns and cities and iii) that no person shall be imprisoned without the lawful judgement of their equals.

In Britain the provisions of the Magna Carta have been taken up from time to time as a banner for discontented people rallying against the monarch. During John Wesley’s lifetime several radicals re-appropriated Magna Carta in their protests for more rights for the people.

Perhaps most significantly Magna Carta was a fundamental document in the new nation growing up in North America. The Charter of each colony, beginning with James I’s charter for Virginia in 1606 included protection for the colonists’ rights – drawing directly on Magna Carta. Indeed for the Founding Fathers Magna Carta was placed above statute law. Interestingly the monument at Runnymede erected in 1957 to mark the spot where the Magna Carta was signed was erected not by the UK Government, nor by any human rights organisation but by the American Bar Association.

Magna Carta has continued to have its impact in providing rights for citizens across the world and informed the writing of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

Could King John and the 13th century barons and bishops of England ever have imagined that their efforts to bring about a better quality of life for people in Britain, would have such a lasting and widespread impact?

Throughout history people have sought to improve their lives and to lay down rules, laws which would apply impartially – at least in theory if not always in practice.

This applies to the Kingdoms of this world – what about the Kingdom of God?

The Jews considered themselves as God's chosen people. They developed a whole corpus of law, seen mainly in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, to keep themselves separate and pure, living in harmony with God's intention for the world. Yet they also looked forward to the time when the Messiah, God's messenger would come and bring in God's Kingdom, God's kingly rule here on earth.

So it should not surprise us that the 'Kingdom of God' is a central theme of Jesus' teaching because he understood himself as beginning the dawn of this kingdom, God's rule on earth.

Jesus was concerned with the renewal of the world along the lines of God's original purpose. Jesus, a Jew, had seen how so many of the Jews had become legalistic, rigid, lacking in compassion and feeling superior to other people. The Jews had lost sight of their calling to be a light to other nations. So Jesus' mission was to tell people that the Kingdom of God was at hand – the expected time was about to be fulfilled.

So, with the spirit of God upon him, Jesus brought the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God – a time in which God would put right the evil situation into which the world had fallen and recreate the intention of his original creation.

Jesus, in doing this, was setting himself up as a rival authority to a Jewish faith based on law alone. So it was not too surprising that the Jewish authorities became increasingly disturbed and angry at Jesus' teaching and actions.

Mark Chapter 4 from which we heard our reading earlier is full of parables spoken by Jesus as he tried to explain to his followers what the kingdom of God was all about and how it would come to pass. Parables are stories that use familiar imagery, familiar situation in the life of the hearers. Parables are both familiar yet challenging – they draw the listener into the story then disturb them with their twists and turns.

So let us move to the two specific parables that we heard in our reading. The Kingdom of God 'is like a seed sown in the ground by a farmer. Every night he went to bed, every day he got up and the seed sprouted and grew without him knowing how it had happened.

This was not news to Jesus' hearers nor is it news to us – but the story points up the fact, a simple yet profound truth about the position of humankind in God's world. Farmers – human beings – can help seeds to grow or prevent seeds from growing but they do not cause seeds to grow. Entering into this parable puts humankind, puts us, in our place.

People can frustrate the growth of seeds or assist it but the whole process could not happen without the dynamics of God-given creation. Growth happens, imperceptibly, day by day and hour by hour unseen by human eye.

To return to the parable we read, 'when the crop is ready – it is cut because the harvest-time has arrived. Jesus' hearers would have picked up the reference here to the book of Joel – to the Day of the Lord, when everyone would be judged.

The Jews of Jesus' time thought that God's coming Kingdom would vindicate them and condemn those outside, the rest. In this parable Jesus is challenging that assumption. A time of judgement will indeed come but it will look different from what people expect. This is a challenge for us, too – in case we, like the Jews of old, think we have a guaranteed place in God's kingdom. Remember how many of Jesus' stories told of the faith of outsiders – Samaritans, Roman soldiers and tax-collectors.

The second parable in our reading is probably better known to us. 'With what shall we compare the Kingdom of God? – A grain of mustard seed. It would be lovely to know what expression Jesus had on his face as he related this parable – possibly a broad grin because this parable verges on the ludicrous. Mustard was a tall annual herb that grew high but spindly – it was no tree in the conventional understanding of that word. The listeners would laugh at the very thought of birds nesting in a mustard plant.

And that, of course, was what Jesus intended – his story grabbed their attention by its sheer ridiculousness, people were hanging on his every word to see what would come next in this fantastical story. But for those who knew their Scriptures, they would pick up the reference to birds nesting in trees and recognise that Jesus was alluding to Ezekiel's prophecy to the exiles in Babylon about birds nesting in trees. But Ezekiel was referring to tall cedar trees not spindly mustard plants. Jesus was twisting the old story; subverting it and throwing out the startling idea of the Kingdom of God being like a garden herb that can grow everywhere, and even more unbelievable, that it can sprout large branches for birds to nest in.

People expected the Kingdom to be strong and dominant like cedars – they really did not know what to make of a Kingdom which was likened to the spindly mustard plant! And the message from all this? Expect the unexpected, throw away your preconceived ideas. Jesus was saying God's kingdom will gather harvests where we least expect them.

Every day, every night God is working at building up his kingdom in the most unexpected places – in prisons, among the homeless, among those at the top of the pile as well as those at the bottom of the pile in locations all over the world. Who would have dreamt that seeds of the Kingdom planted in China by 19th and 20th century missionaries would now be yielding such harvests of believers despite the years of Communism and the Cultural Revolution. There are now more worshippers in China on a Sunday than in the whole of Europe.

Those barons, bishops and archbishops who gathered at Runnymede 800 years ago to try to secure more accountable rule could not have known that such a small piece of paper as the Magna Carta, signed on a floodplain in a small island off the coast of

Europe could have had such an impact around the world for ever after. And we should not forget that the church had a major role in the drafting, signing and preservation of the Magna Carta. It was drafted in large part by Archbishop Langton and 2 of the four copies were placed in cathedrals for safe-keeping.

But we must not forget that Magna Carta has continued to have an impact because individuals have cherished it, recalled it to peoples' minds and have sought to live by it and get others to do so also. And so it is with the Kingdom of God. In Jesus the seed of God's kingdom was sown and began to germinate but we have our part to play in cultivating it and nurturing it to yield its full harvest. Jesus's words, life and actions gave us a glimpse of what the Kingdom of God looks like – but for it to come in all its fullness we have our part to play – in looking after the needy, caring for the sick, loving our neighbour and regarding all people as created in God's image. We are called to faithfulness, to obedience and patience and to openness to unexpected harvests in places we would never have imagined.

So, on this anniversary of Magna Carta we can proclaim, 'may the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ' and may we play our part in bringing that to pass.

So I end with a prayer of expectation for the Kingdom of God written by the South African Methodist minister, John van der Laar – I pray that we might make this prayer our own.

If we will allow it your reign, your kingdom shifts us
Leading us from denying to expecting
from cynical mocking to faith-filled wonder.
This shift we sorely need.

And so we pray for expectation, kingdom expectation
That we may see your abundance
And *take for granted* that it must be shared;
That we may know your wisdom,
and *assume* that it should guide all our affairs;
That we may sense your peace
and *be offended* by its destructive alternative;
That we may embrace your wholeness,
and *find it second nature* to bring it to others;
That we may celebrate your justice,
and *live* it as easily as breathing.

May we so believe in your constantly coming reign,
That we expect to see it appearing at every turn,
In every moment
And live and work as those
Through whom it comes. Amen

