



THE KINGDOM

A KINGDOM IDENTITY

Sunday 25 April 2021

EXTENDED SERMON TRANSCRIPT

One of the things that encourages me as I read through the prophets of the Old Testament is their passion and vision for kingdom. It does my heart good to see the passion of others, the fire in their bones - along with their anguish and frustration. It seems that both go hand-in-hand in life.

One of the most hope-filled vivid pictures of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament is in Ezekiel chapter 47, which describes a coming time of the pouring out of God like a river from the temple; and as it spreads out, it just gets deeper and deeper, and wherever the river flows dead things come to life, trees flourish and are fruitful, creation is restored. I just love this vision. It still captures me and fills me with hope, along with this ache for why it's not more of a reality now - not just out there, but in me. There are times when I burn with vision for the kingdom and times when it seems to be getting further away, not closer, and I think to myself, "How is this ever going to happen? How is God going to move out? How is He going to renew hearts, to release the river of His presence and His kingdom today?"

Ezekiel, like Jeremiah or Joel (see Joel chapter 2), understood that unless the presence of God (the Spirit) was present and moving, nothing would change - then or now. Ultimately the reversal of the fall is the reunion of God with humanity in the place of His real glorious presence - unmediated, unveiled, unhindered, unboxed by temple or priesthood, flowing out like a broken water main, like a flood - only not bringing destruction, but life.

Jesus sat with a woman at a well in John chapter 4. As He drank a cup of water He spoke to her about another kind of water - living water that would permanently satisfy: a river of living water. Then, similarly, in John chapter 7:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." (John 7:37-38)

By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive.

And that's where we must now turn our attention to for the next three sermons. We will talk about three aspects of the Spirit and Kingdom: identity, community, transformation.

Today: IDENTITY.

Identity is a huge thing today in our culture. "Who are you?" Do you realise how confusing this question is today? We live in time where answering that has become a minefield, especially for anyone born this century. Let me briefly unearth a few of those mines (and please, understand that I'm offering these only as commentary and they are generalisations):

1. It's all about me. Historically we found our sense of identity as members of a community or tribe or clan. Our responsibility was first to the community and we obtained our sense of identity and purpose in relation to the greater good of the tribe, and any other distinctive were secondary to serving that end because the needs of the community outweighed the needs of the individual (John F Kennedy's inauguration speech had those famous words: "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"). But modern western democracies have turned the good principles of liberalism into a kind of radical individualism which says not only that the individual is important but that the needs of the individual outweighs the needs of the community. And so, in this environment, more than ever, it's all on me to define or form my own identity, apart from others - and once I've done that, then I'll find other people that reflect or affirm me and make them my tribe. So immediately that puts the pressure on me to work this out alone.

2. It's what's true for me. The search for that reality is only valid if it is the construction of your own unique set of experiences. Now of course your history, your unique set of experiences, matter a lot. But this cultural trend toward subjectivity means that what is truest about you will be found within you in statements like, "I am what I feel; I am what I desire." This kind of thinking was really birthed in the 60's with what became known as post-modernism. Subjectivity was becoming the new objectivity. But how reliable are our feelings and desires as the final source of authority in our lives?

3. Don't trust the establishment. A hallmark of post-modern thought is a deep suspicion of any traditional, cultural, religious or political institutions, corporations or viewpoints shaping your identity; or, for that matter, even the objective data of science - these are just forms of institutional oppression. This is not some straw man argument, this the version

of post-modernism we are living in today which is very strategic in blurring the boundaries and moving us away from a traditional vision of the world and reshaping the language as it goes. This reaches us in the form of identity politics; cancel culture; in what constitutes hate speech especially around race or gender or sexuality; the social pressure to accept trans or queer theory and remove gendered language like 'mum' and 'dad', 'male' and 'female'. This is becoming mainstream thinking and language - and with it, the suspicion of anything that was considered objectively true or normative. So that makes identity more complicated, especially for young people today.

4. Social media's cultural influence. All of the above is channelled through the online world of social media and advertising, which incidentally is curated uniquely for you by some Google algorithm. We are bombarded by a continual stream of messaging and images. Influencers are the new evangelists of popular culture and identity formation. Their credibility is a function of on the number of followers not their qualification and they essentially preach identity based on three common drivers:

1. *I am what I do* (eg. job, talent)
2. *I am what I have* (eg. brands I wear, charisma, looks, connections, lifestyle, experiences, holidays, interior design flair)
3. *I am what I desire or feel or want* (eg. gender and sexual orientation)

We have a young generation forming identity around a whole new breed of influencers and voices claiming authority - and it's not like the old days of sticking a poster of KISS or ACDC or whatever your favourite band was on your bedroom wall, and listening to their albums. You are no longer a just a long-distance fan: you are a follower. Now you are instantly drawn into their next unfiltered thought or tweet or activity, which they want you to click like, follow or comment as it builds their profile and makes them more money. This is so powerful and exponentially more formative and influential than we realise.

So all that to say "who am I?" is not an easy question to answer today and we are seeing so much confusion and fragility around identity.

Now, how does Jesus make a difference? As a follower of Jesus, identity is a little more straightforward. Our identity has a foundation not in what is internally built, but externally bestowed; not in what is achieved, but received; that the foundation of your life is not what you say about you, not what others say about you - but what God says about you.

In Matthew 3:16-17, Jesus was baptised prior to commencing His ministry:

As soon as Jesus was baptised, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."

Before Jesus started ministry, His life was shaped by this core truth about Himself: beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. I love that in this moment we see the whole trinity present. Jesus is immediately led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He is tempted by the devil - and did you notice that all those temptations were around the question of identity? "Who are you, really?" asks Satan. Jesus enters into ministry not in order to achieve or earn that identity, but already having received it. And absolutely foundational to our lives as followers of Jesus is the same foundation: that what is most true about me is not who I say I am, not who anyone else says, not what I do or have or want - but who God says I am.

I Romans 8:14-17, Paul says:

"For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by Him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory."

Paul here is grasping what Jesus said on numerous occasions: that God would pour His Spirit into the hearts of believers; and the first assignment of the Spirit is to lead us into identity, to reveal that we are God's children, adopted in, heirs of God, co heirs with Christ in His kingdom. The Spirit tells us who we are. I noticed that Jesus uses this phrase, "the Spirit of truth," several times in John:

John 14:15-20: *"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever - **the Spirit of truth**. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."*

John 15:26: *"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father - **the Spirit of truth** who goes out from the Father - He will testify about me."*

John 16:13: *"But when He, **the Spirit of truth**, comes, He will guide you into all the truth."*

Have you ever thought about this description of the Spirit? The Spirit of truth reverses the spirit of deception that the first Adam heard in the Garden in Genesis chapter 3. Jesus, the second Adam, was tempted by the deceiver in the desert - only Jesus firmly knew His identity (and He knew scripture) and that made all the difference. The Spirit of truth leads

us into the basis on which we are to now live in the kingdom.

Let's summarise this identity from the passages:

- **I am loved, I belong to Christ, Christ is in me**
- **I am included, adopted into family with full status as a son/daughter**
- **I can approach God in the intimacy and security of a child to a good dad.**
- **I have an everlasting inheritance in that family**
- **I am no longer defined by what I have, what I do, what I desire**
- **I am not defined by who people say I am, or am not**
- **I am not ruled by fear because His love drives it out**
- **I am royalty, I have dignity, I am genuinely and completely loved**
- **I have a purpose in His kingdom and power and authority to walk it out**
- **My destiny is to share in His Glory**

We have to get this truth deep down into our core and keep it there. They're not just propositions.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit moves in dramatic ways and your world is turned upside-down, quickly. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is like a whisper, gentle and slow, a gradual awakening. As I get older I am less concerned by the form of the Spirit as I am by the fruit. The greatest marker of the Holy Spirit is that the truth comes into your heart and mind - worship is in spirit and truth. The Spirit will lead you into the truth about who Jesus is in you and who you are in Jesus. The Spirit takes this reality and makes it known to you.

We need to know and live from this as the foundation of our identity. If we don't, then what we do, what we have, who we listen to, what we go after in life will be motivated by (I think) some level of insecurity. Our dreams will be unsanctified (not endorsed by God) and we will live with a vision of life that ultimately can't deliver for us - because whatever you do ends, whatever you have is lost, whatever you desire or feel fades, whoever you follow falls out of fashion or gets cancelled...

I know personally I have to keep checking my heart and ask, "Why do I do this? Why do I need that? Why is the internal dialogue on repeat in my head? Am I acting like a son or a slave? Am I living for His praise or others?" I need to constantly reorient my life around who He says I am. To be honest, I very easily forget my identity in Christ. I forget whose I am. I forget that all that really matters is having a Father that says, "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." And so I'm reminded that it is critical that I daily meditate on God's Word and pray. I need to keep in step with the Spirit of truth, pursue intimacy with Him, and develop some intentional spiritual relationships with others who I can be honest with and they can genuinely ask me the tough questions.

That living water Jesus offers the woman at the well, is the same water He offers us: the water all those prophets longed for, the truth to invade our hearts, to know and then live like it's true.

It's not surprising that the beginning of life in Christ is receiving the Spirit of truth. He comes to abide in us. Invite God in. If you are thirsty, if you are feeling small, burdened or, tired - there are practical things you can do, but the most important thing is to say, "Come in Holy Spirit. Let your river flow. I need living water every day, to renew my heart every day. Restore the joy of my salvation, the assurance that I am your child every day." How great the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called 'Children of God', and that is what we are.

So, may you see every part of your life through the lens of your identity in Christ. May the truest thing about you be the love of God, as displayed in Jesus. May you take another step in the new life opened up for you in Christ. May you thirst after the fellowship of the Spirit of truth to lead and empower your steps. Amen.