

Introducing the Kingdom

Your Kingdom Come

For Jesus and the early Church, the arrival of the Kingdom of God was a central part of their message. So if we want to understand our faith, we have to understand the Kingdom of God.

In essence, it's very simple. A kingdom is a place where a Sovereign – a King or Queen – reigns. In legal terms, it is the territory where the Sovereign makes the law. In practice, it is where the people acknowledge the absolute authority of the Sovereign.

This sounds very archaic and abstract, but how we understand the Kingdom of God shapes the story we tell, how we read our Bible and how we live our lives.

Many Christians are living a story which goes something like this: God reigns in Heaven, but this world is in rebellion against Him. Our aim is to remain untainted by the world, so that when we die we will go to live with Him in Heaven.

The story that Jesus told starts off the same, but the end is quite different. God reigns in Heaven, but this world is in rebellion against Him. Our aim is to live here and now as citizens of God's Kingdom, building the Kingdom with our love and our lives, our prayers and our deeds, bringing the Kingdom to the people around us and helping them to become citizens of the Kingdom.

We usually think that our job is to get to Heaven, but in Biblical terms, our job is to bring Heaven to Earth – to see God's Kingdom, established on the Earth; in the words of the Lord's Prayer: it is to see His will be done on Earth as it is done in Heaven.

A Dangerous Doctrine

Working to establish God's reign on Earth sounds like a scary bid for totalitarian control. To be fair, it has been used this way at times in the past. There will always be people who want absolute control and are willing to use God as a means to get it.

Henry VIII split with Rome in order to gain control of the church – which brought massive control over the lives of his subjects; he claimed to reign in God's name, but it is doubtful whether God really supported much of what went on. Oliver Cromwell tried again, this time without a King, and succeeded in banning Christmas for a while.

The fundamental thing that Henry and Oliver, and all the others like them, seem to have ignored, is that the Kingdom of God is based on love and freedom. You cannot force people to be free, you cannot make them love. You cannot impose God's Kingdom from the top: you have to embrace it from the bottom.

In fact, far from being a tool which can be used by tyrants and dictators, God's Kingdom is a subversive power which challenges all claims to ultimate authority by human rulers. The coming of God's Kingdom guarantees their overthrow.

Back in the days of Jesus, subjects of the Roman empire had to accept that 'Caesar is Lord' – in other words, Caesar has absolute authority; the early Christians challenged this by proclaiming that 'Jesus is Lord', and were killed for it. We 'render to Caesar' only what belongs to Caesar: absolute allegiance belongs to God alone.

At times in the past, the Church has got confused here, with Christian leaders seeking to exercise secular power – all for a good cause, of course. Jesus had the opportunity to exercise power – the people wanted to make Him King (John 6:15) – but He rejected that route. As a very brief summary, He chose influence over power.

In the Church, we have often identified our institutional success with the Kingdom of God, but these are not the same thing at all. At times they coincide, but we assume they are the same at our peril. Our institutions are imperfect, and run by imperfect people; also, God is always working outside the institutional church, in ways we often fail to recognise because we assume that His agenda is the same as ours.

A story from the book of Joshua illustrates the distinction between church and Kingdom very nicely. In chapter 5, Joshua is preparing to tackle Jericho, his first military challenge. He looks up, sees a man with a drawn sword in his hand and challenges him: "Are you for us or for our enemies?" The man replies, "Neither, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." God is not on your side, or on mine, or on the side of any of our Christian institutions. The important question is: are we on His side?

Jesus is Lord

Jesus *is* Lord, with all authority in Heaven and on Earth, but He never imposes His authority. He commands us to follow Him, but we are free to obey His command or ignore it. Of course, if we love Him, we will want to do what He says; and if we choose to ignore His commands, we cannot avoid the consequences of our choice; but neither the love nor the consequences compel our obedience. We always remain free.

If we are to build a society based on the character of Jesus, it must be pluralistic: people must be free to believe anything they wish, and worship anything they wish. The purpose of the law is to stop us hurting other people, not to make us devout.

Jesus is our Lord and our model: the way He exercised authority shows us how authority is exercised in God's Kingdom – how we are called to exercise whatever authority we possess in our day-to-day living, as citizens of God's Kingdom.

This Kingdom is not ruled by a tyrant who demands obedience, but by a Lord Who came to serve, Who loved and forgave, Who chose to suffer and die rather than fight, Who commanded His followers to love their enemies and do good to those who treat them badly. This is the character of the King and the nature of the Kingdom we are called to build.

A Universal Kingdom

One of the hardest ideas for any group of Christians to take on board is, perversely, something we constantly sing and talk about: we worship the God of the whole world. To put it another way: we do not worship a tribal god.

Stated like this, it seems very simple – obvious, really. We are accustomed to the idea that any God worth the name must be a God of the whole world. We may argue about *which* God is the One True God, but many of us are very clear that there can only be (at most) just One.

Except that, for most of history, gods have usually come in groups. We are familiar with many of the Greek and Roman gods, and can probably name half a dozen Norse gods. And then there are all the gods of India and Egypt, before we get into more exotic varieties. Each of these gods was a god of something – war or wine, sun or sea. For some people, each mountain, tree and river had its own god.

For most people, for most of history, the gods you worshipped defined who you were: each people group had their gods; when your people conquered another people group, it was obvious that your gods were more powerful than their gods. Officially, the people you conquered were generally told to start worshipping your gods (to demonstrate that they are now your people); in practice, they often continued to worship the old gods using new names. After all, it can be hard to tell the difference between one god of the harvest and another.

The Romans came up with a novel idea: instead of trying to force the people they conquered to adopt their gods, they incorporated the new gods into their official list. Keep worshipping your gods, that's fine – just be polite and pay a little attention to ours too, if you don't mind. This was a brilliant stroke of diplomacy which helped them conquer most of the known world. And it worked, right up to the point when they conquered an insignificant little kingdom in the Middle East.

The Jews did not play ball when it came to religion. They insisted there was only one God. To all educated people of the day, this was quite absurd. But they could not be shaken from this idea, and would not accept any additional gods. The Romans tried forcing the point but, in the end, gave up: the Jews were allowed to be the only people in the Roman Empire who did not worship the state gods.

And then Christians came along: they were not Jews, but insisted there was only one God, and this was just too much. You can't run an Empire if you can't control who people worship so the Christians had to go. You probably know the story from here.

The point is this: for a long time, every civilised, educated person knew there are a bunch of gods, you have to show them a bit of respect, but it probably doesn't matter too much what you call them. The idea that there is only one God, who created everyone and – get this! – loves everyone, is a very strange and troubling concept: we might *say* we believe He loves everyone the same but, deep down, most of us are fairly sure He prefers *us*. We are much more comfortable when we live with a tribal god, even if we call Him Jesus and believe that He made the whole world.

God's Kingdom, as the early church understood and proclaimed it, is a universal Kingdom: He made everyone and loves everyone just the same. That is why Jesus was brutally clear: love your enemy – because your Heavenly Father loves your enemies just as much as He loves you. That can be hard to take at times, but it is a core part of the Kingdom message.

A Church which seeks to build the Kingdom of God must be in the forefront of combating racism and sexism and prejudice of every kind. If every person is to be given equal love and respect, then around our dining tables and in our committee meetings, men must learn how to stop talking over the women. If there is only one Kingdom, then every divided community must be united. If we are called to play our part in building the Kingdom, then these tasks have been given to us.

This does not mean we must create a single mono-culture: we are allowed our differences (He created each one of us different, after all!) but differences must not be allowed to function as divisions because more important than any difference is our unity as children of the One Father; our variety is a strength, not a weakness.

There is only one Spirit, one Lord, one Body. Unity is a big thing in the New Testament. We think we have our work cut out as we strive to see the Church function as one Body, but the Kingdom requires us to live in love – and as much harmony as we can manage – with all people, to establish justice everywhere and to care for all creation as the work of His hands.

A Spiritual Kingdom

Many good Christians believe that all this may be interesting theology, but it is essentially irrelevant: God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom. Our job, they say, is to save souls and thereby build the Kingdom one soul at a time. After all, Jesus Himself clarified the point with Pilate: "My Kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36)

The Kingdom of God is not a physical Kingdom with borders and currency and trade barriers. You can't find it on a map, and anyone who proclaims that the Kingdom of God (or the New Jerusalem) can be found 'here' is either fooling themselves or trying to fool you.

Because there are no borders, you can't fight for the Kingdom with swords and spears – or with guns and guided missiles. You fight for a spiritual Kingdom using spiritual weapons: when you choose to love, even though everything within you cries out that hatred is the only reasonable response to the way you have been treated. You fight for the Kingdom when you tell the truth, even though it gains you nothing and costs you dearly. You fight for the Kingdom when you choose to die rather than harm someone else – someone who, whether they know it or not, is also a child of God.

The Kingdom of God may 'only' be spiritual, but it undermines the spiritual foundations of all Earthly kingdoms. "Jesus is Lord" contradicts the Roman empire's claim that Caesar is lord. As the Kingdom advances, every human kingdom and institution based on greed, fear and self-interest will eventually recognise that it is under attack, which is why the Roman empire killed Jesus and why He promised that His followers will experience suffering and persecution.

While the Kingdom of God is spiritual, we are called to act in ways that make it real. Our beliefs and actions have very real, concrete consequences. One obvious example is that Jesus taught about forgiveness, which is a spiritual activity, but has profound practical consequences – when two people (or two communities) have been holding on to resentment, bitterness and antagonism, it results in them discovering how to live at peace with one another.

A Kingdom of Love

Through the centuries, people have asked: how should I live? There are several ways we can answer this question, but much of the Christian response can be boiled down to a couple of straightforward points.

Firstly, *morality*. Nobody has yet worked out a way for any human society to function without some form of morality. There are many codes of ethics, most of which seek to provide a system, a set of rules which seek to tell you whether an action is good or bad. Within the Christian framework, we have been given a set of rules (‘the law’) to provide a vital starting point for understanding the difference, but no set of rules, no matter how well crafted, is capable of doing the job we need.

Secondly, *love*. Love – and only love – is the fulfilment of the law, and love cannot be expressed as a set of rules. The Kingdom of God is all about love – love properly understood, love as we see it embodied in Jesus. Love is the only absolute. All our theology, all our rules, all our systems and structures and principles – they only exist to help us understand: what is the loving thing to say or do?

It turns out that living in the Kingdom is all about loving people in a moral, intelligent, realistic way: loving our enemies, loving God with everything we have, loving our neighbour as we love ourselves, and loving one another as Jesus loves us. Simple! This is not easy, but it is so simple a child can understand it.

A Coming Kingdom

Jesus began His ministry with this message: the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Repent and believe this good news. The Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand, you can touch it, and one day soon it will break into our present reality in power, and overwhelm the lies and the selfishness which appear to be so successful. One day soon, the old way of doing things will no longer work. If you don’t learn now to function in the new Kingdom, you will not cope when the old Kingdom disappears.

We are called to inhabit the coming Kingdom before it fully appears. Compassion for the weak and justice for the oppressed may appear to be luxuries we cannot afford right now, but that is a lie of the old Kingdom.

Within God’s Kingdom, we cannot afford to withhold compassion and justice, for the measure we give will be the measure we receive. Did we show love for the least of God’s children, wherever they live, or did we choose to measure ourselves against the standards of the present kingdom? We desperately need to hear this message of the coming Kingdom – especially those of us living in the affluent West.

A Vital Kingdom

Jesus calls people to follow Him. This is not an invitation to believe in a set of doctrines, to enter a personal relationship with God, or to receive salvation – although doctrine, relationship and salvation are all parts of the package being offered.

Jesus came with a mission: to bring the Kingdom of God. The only way to follow Jesus is to take up His mission, to make it your own. Jesus does not call us to Himself so that we will go to Heaven when we die: He calls us to bring Heaven down to Earth, to pray and work to make God's Kingdom a reality on Earth, here and now.

When we follow Jesus, we encounter His grace, we discover that our sin has been forgiven: we are no longer guilty sinners afraid of punishment, but forgiven children delighting in our Father's love. Wonderful though this is, it is not the end: this is just the beginning. Every child of God is called to work in the family business and, as forgiven children, guided and empowered by the Spirit of God, like our Lord, our God, our Older Brother, we too must be about our Father's business.

The good news of the Kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, is universal in scope and absolute in its demands: it gives us no opportunity to use what we have been given for our own selfish ends. Some people think the Gospel message promises us personal happiness and fulfilment. This is not entirely wrong, but when we live as a citizen of the Kingdom our primary objective is not our own personal happiness: our aim is that God's desires should be fulfilled and His objectives achieved.

God's Kingdom is vital. From a theological perspective, there can be nothing better or more important than God's will being done. However, on this point at least, our theology is simply confirming our own common sense: it is surely obvious that society will fall apart if we only pursue our own success and selfish desires.

Our only hope – the only hope for the human race – is if we discover another way to live, a way in which our own needs and desires matter, but we equally respect the needs and desires of our neighbour. We can choose to believe that this is good and possible, we can commit ourselves to Jesus, His mission and His Kingdom, we can choose the most challenging, worthwhile and fulfilling life possible, or we can choose to reject life and love in pursuit of self-interest.

God's Kingdom, or our kingdom: we choose, and there is no more vital choice. What sort of people do we want to be, and what sort of society do we want to build?

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

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