

THY KINGDOM COME

The closer we get to truth, the more difficult it is to keep it clear, to stay focused, to remember, to build it into our way of living. Often, on the very verge of the greatest principles of life, we lose concentration, get bored, wander off, somehow forget why we came. Nobody expects it to be this way. Truth is exciting, dynamic, thrilling, soul-satisfying. From a distance, it attracts us with amazing force – like a bear to honey; like a child to Disneyland or Christmas; like a man to ... well, you understand.

But then, as we get right at the edge of truth, or even into it, suddenly it's as if some spell were cast over us or somebody put something in the water and we lose focus and concentration, forget why we came, and wander off again. It's like trying to find the North Pole with a compass. From a distance, it works fine and the direction is exciting and compelling. But the closer you get, the more the compass floats uncertainly, and many a traveler wanders off to nowhere or goes into the long sleep. *Thy Kingdom come.*

To try to understand what the faithful have believed about Jesus, and to try to understand what Jesus Himself believed – there ought to be a connection. But often they seem like two completely divergent subjects. If we were to make a list of Jesus' favorite themes or subjects, what would be on the list? What did Jesus talk about most, care about most, preach about most often? Prayer? He prayed a lot but did not talk about it much. Love? Not really. He implied it often and showed it frequently, but He did not talk about it much at all. Paul is the one who loved to talk about love, and, after him, John. What *Jesus* really loved to talk about was God and the Kingdom and the Spirit.

If we were to pick Jesus' all-time favorite theme, I suspect we would end up choosing "the Kingdom." Weighing all the factors, Jesus was turned on about the Kingdom – that is, God's Kingdom: the Kingdom of Heaven. He came to proclaim it. He talked about it endlessly. He told stories about it. Increasingly, it is clear that His whole life was about living in the Kingdom – now.

Some of you will wonder if I have this right. Let me show the contrast. In Matthew, for instance, Jesus speaks about love in chapters five, nineteen, and twenty-two. Two of those times, somebody

else brings up the subject and Jesus only recites an Old Testament verse in passing. But Jesus speaks about the Kingdom in every chapter from three through thirteen, in chapter sixteen, and in every chapter from eighteen through twenty-six. The Kingdom is ever on Jesus' lips. He is always discussing it, proclaiming it, describing its features, inviting people to come into it.

It is not terribly surprising then that *Thy Kingdom come* is the center and focal point of the prayer Jesus gives to His followers. I do not mean that the Kingdom is more important than God, but try to feel the motion of the prayer, the flow of it. The most important word is the first one. We tried to cover that. If we do not claim the right relationship with God, it will not do any good to talk about the Kingdom – God's or anybody else's. Granted. I promise not to forget if you promise too.

But see how this prayer leads up to and then away from its central petition. *Thy Kingdom come* is the core petition, the cry, the passion of this prayer. This is where the action, the dynamic, and the motion of the prayer come to apex. *Thy Kingdom come* is what the prayer wants to have happen! It is the relationship with *Abba* that sustains and nurtures Jesus; for this very reason, it is the Kingdom that is His motive power. It is the Kingdom that brings His decisions into clarity, and it is His passion for God's Kingdom that organizes His love and loyalty toward God in daily behavior. So Jesus gets angry when Pharisees exclude sinners, because that does not match the Kingdom. When they drift off onto all the regulations and details and seem to forget the reasons behind them, they are missing the emotional connection to the Kingdom.

And Jesus gets, well, there is no word for it: some combination of annoyance, frustration, compassion, and anger. Whatever the word, Jesus cannot stand to see people maimed or diseased or blind – unwhole. It does not match the pattern of the Kingdom. He can take it for only so long and then power bursts forth from Him to heal.

It is the Kingdom that keeps Jesus in that Garden: *not my will but thine be done*. It is the Kingdom that makes His eyes sparkle. It is the Kingdom He wants to share with His friends. And it is love for that Kingdom that drives Him to the Cross. *Thy Kingdom come*.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Kingdom was the only thing Jesus really cared about here on earth. It was the only thing He worked for. Every decision was made according to how it would affect

the Kingdom. This is why nobody has ever been able to come up with a Christian ethic that could stand on its own feet or make sense in its own right as a code of behavior. You have to pray three times a day, every day: *Thy Kingdom come*. Then some of the behavioral precepts begin to make a certain sense, in that they have application to how we may live for the Kingdom. Praying for the Kingdom clarifies the ethic; studying the ethic cannot define the Kingdom. Did that lose you? Our behavior is supposed to come out of our prayer; our prayer is not supposed to come along to bless or justify our behavior. Pray first; act second. Do not act first and pray second.

Actually, one great sage did say, “Pray as men of action; act as men of prayer.” But he was an idealist.

So far, I have suggested that the Kingdom is Jesus’ favorite theme and that it is also, therefore and logically, the central petition in the Lord’s Prayer. The right relationship with God is established, and then we get to live for the Kingdom. Then this petition – *Thy Kingdom come* – is to become the motivating and organizing theme around which our own lives revolve. The petitions that follow it cover concerns we have about living *for* the Kingdom, but they are only there because *Thy Kingdom come* is now our central purpose. It is therefore assumed, obvious, and established that followers of Jesus – those to whom Jesus gives this prayer – will also align their lives to this prayer and will themselves live for the Kingdom. This is not a child’s tea party that Jesus is hosting. This is an invitation to a revolution. Only, it is an inside revolution first – a spiritual revolution. That means it is much greater, more far-reaching, and more powerful than a mere political revolution.

The Kingdom is Jesus’ favorite theme, and it stars as the focal petition in the Lord’s Prayer. But there is still a question to ask: How do you mean that? As we reminded ourselves last week, many Jewish prayers included some sort of similar petition (e.g., “may his kingly rule be established in your lifetime,” from the *Kaddish*). Such prayers had been prayed for many generations; for three hundred years before Jesus, they were coming with greater and greater fervency. Apocryphal books backed by Old Testament pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea and Nag Hammadi scrolls have made it ever more clear that many groups before, during, and after Jesus were focusing on the Kingdom coming. But they meant the “End of the Age.” They meant the expectation that God would bring creation to some kind of just and final conclusion. Things would be resolved. God would bring life

as we know it to an end and would set up the Kingdom as it was intended to be. “Thy Kingdom come” on the lips of many is a plea for God to close it out down here – to bring the last days and take us to heaven.

John the Baptist had much of this message in his movement. “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” Superficially, that can mean “Change your ways because God’s mop-up operation is just around the corner.” Jesus inherited that movement but tried to change the meaning, with only partial success. So the question is: How do *you* mean it when you pray *Thy Kingdom come*? Do you mean you want what is often called “the second coming”? Many Christian groups do mean essentially or precisely that: “Get us out of here! We are tired of this veil of tears and injustice. Thy Kingdom come.” Many Christians today half hope or fully hope that the nuclear holocaust will come, signaling the end of this world and the beginning of God’s Kingdom (as they see it). It is not fun here, for many. When will the promises be fulfilled?

Many, many other Christians – often without great clarity as to what they mean or expect – pray “Thy Kingdom come” and mean, in some way, a passage from this realm to the next. It is a longing for heaven. Matthew’s extended phrasing is very interesting here: “*Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.*” That does not daunt the literalists, who say we are supposed to expect a physically reconstructed Jerusalem and eternal life right here on earth anyway. “Thy Kingdom come” still refers to the end-time for them.

What Matthew’s addition really shows is the eagerness of the early church to keep it clear that Jesus is not just talking about a later time. No “pie in the sky, by and by” garbage. *Thy Kingdom come* HERE – on earth. And NOW! Whatever the end-time is, that’s God’s problem; let us live in the Kingdom NOW! And that, of course, matches the Jesus I hear and know.

So the question is: How do *you* mean it? And the answer is: Jesus meant it like nobody else ever had. “*The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*” (Luke 17:21) “*This thing you have been waiting for is fulfilled in your hearing.*” (Luke 4:21) Jesus was proclaiming and inviting us into – and He Himself was living in – the Kingdom at the very time. He was waiting no longer. It was present and happening. And He kept revealing that anybody could be in on it – they could be *in* the Kingdom – if they would only choose to step into it. Is your compass starting to wander? Are you getting sleepy?

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The Kingdom is not in some other time zone or some future eon. It is not in some other place – some divine dimension. Wherever there is the KING and one loyal subject, there is the Kingdom! No power on earth can prevent it. Then Jesus says, in effect: “Watch me. I am loyal to the King. Therefore, wherever I am, there is the Kingdom. And if you believe me, trust me, follow me, and thereby become a loyal subject also, the Kingdom will also be wherever *you* are!” No power on earth can prevent it or take it away. Start praying *Thy Kingdom come* and you will be in the Kingdom immediately, and you will be able to live for the Kingdom for the rest of your eternal life (which has already begun). But you cannot serve two Masters. There can only be one King. Stop living for any and all other kingdoms. “*Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 6:33)

You can imagine what was happening to the people of the early church, as each day they meditated on *Thy Kingdom come* and tried to apply it in all their affairs. It was a dimensional breakthrough, like Einstein’s theories were to physics, except a lot more important and far more dynamic. Only a handful were able to follow Jesus into this new WAY of being. Most kept right on thinking He was talking about a Messiahship that would be a political and military coup. Or that He was talking about later. Or that He was talking about some other realm. But Jesus was talking about stepping into the Kingdom here and now! Just like He did. Nothing could stop Him. Nothing can stop us either, if we choose to follow Him. *Abba, of the hallowed name, Thy Kingdom come.*

Fortunately, we have Palm Sunday to illustrate this whole thing. Jesus went on living in the real world – but according to the WAY of the Kingdom, not according to the way of the world. That is, He engineered, set up, and carried out His coup as if people believed what they claimed to believe and as if they wanted what they said they wanted – and as if the world were not run by greed, power, and coercion. *Thy Kingdom come on earth.*

Put it the other way around: To truly test our religious beliefs, what sort of king would we have to have? It would have to be a king who would not rule by coercion, but by acclaim; who would not abuse power, or use it to make himself rich or secure; who would, in fact, trust the wisdom and justice of his subjects for support, cooperation, and effective rule, as well as provide enlightened leadership himself. The citizens, in short, must be given the freedom to choose to obey because they want prosperity and peace for all.

Any other basis for the kingship must of necessity revert to dominance, power struggles, coercion (however benevolent or well-intentioned the verbiage). And then the old themes would arise and increase, as they always do, until dissenters, competitors, and any who did not side with the king would be ruthlessly dealt with to keep the kingdom secure. In short, and shortly, it would be back to the same old familiar principles that have always run our world: greed, fear, power, jealousy, and all the rest.

So how did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? Just exactly like the new King would have to in all the essential ways. All that was necessary to bring God's rule on earth was for people to be citizens under this new kind of Leader in just the ways we have always said we wanted to be. And what happened? None of us, on any level, were anywhere near able to handle it.

That taught some of us something. And all whom it taught, it converted. We awoke to our true condition. We call it "going to the Cross" – watching Him die; being broken. And we can never live in this world by the old rules ever again.

So we start praying *Thy Kingdom come*: Try me again, Lord. I did not catch it the first time ... or even the first many times. Try me again, Lord. *Thy Kingdom come*. Now. It only takes the true King, and we have You. It takes the King and one or more loyal, faithful subjects and we are in – we are living in it. The Kingdom is here. Let me try again, Lord. *Thy Kingdom come*. Not mine. Not anybody else's. Thine.

What the world is waiting for is Palm Sunday done right – a Palm Sunday that will stick.