

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS

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AT THE TIME WHEN JESUS BEGAN HIS MISSION THE JEWISH TERM 'MESSIAH', WHICH ORIGINALLY MEANT A PERSON ANOINTED AND THUS APPOINTED TO SOME POSITION OF STATUS AND AUTHORITY (A KING OR A PRIEST), WAS IN USE TO REFER TO A FUTURE RULER WHO WOULD BE RAISED UP BY GOD TO DELIVER HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR ENEMIES AND CONQUERORS, TO PURGE THEM FROM EVILDOERS WITHIN THEIR OWN RANKS, AND TO ESTABLISH A COMMUNITY THAT WOULD BE DEDICATED TO GOD AND LIVE BY HIS LAW. After Jesus' death and resurrection the term came to be used by his followers to refer specifically to him. It now signified one who was the fulfilment of the prophecies in the Old Testament about a coming king; he had lived on earth as a wandering prophet and teacher but was now enthroned in heaven rather than on earth. His most important activities were his death in order to bear human sin and its consequences and to overcome the supernatural forces of evil; his resurrection from the dead as a spiritual being whose influence was spread over the whole cosmos; and his future coming to wind up history and bring about the future realm of God that would never again be threatened by evil. The term 'Messiah' thus came to have a different meaning and connotation from what it originally had, although the root meaning of somebody appointed by God to do a kingly task can be traced through the different stages of the development.

This brief word-history is important for our present purpose, first, because it illustrates rather well how words and concepts develop and change their meaning and reference over time, and, second, because it is integrally related to the theme that primarily concerns us here, namely the Kingdom of God. This relationship arises from the fact that the phrase 'Kingdom of God' is the religious topic that was the main, unifying theme of the teaching of Jesus. The connection is even closer because in some way or other the activity of Jesus himself was primarily connected with the establishment of this Kingdom. And, as with 'messiah', so here also we are surveying a concept that was reshaped in the light of what actually happened and was expected to happen.

The starting point in the story is the various references in the Old Testament to God as the ruler of the universe (Ps 93). His sovereignty is implicit right from the beginning in that all that is (evil excepted) is created by him, apparently out of nothing, and we assume that a creator is in some way 'greater' than the creation (even though what is created may be larger in some ways than the creator). We then have the way in which God develops a special relationship with one particular set of human beings, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and

'The kingdom has come, yet not in its fullness, but what we have is the real thing and not a substitute'

TAKING IT FURTHER:

RT France, *Divine Government: God's Kingship in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SPCK, 1990)

RT France, 'Kingdom of God', in KJ Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005), pp. 420–2

G Goldsworthy, 'Kingdom of God', in TD Alexander and BS Rosner (ed.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), pp. 615–20

B Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992)

NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996)

► Jacob. One way of expressing this relationship is in terms of a covenant or binding agreement between a suzerain and a vassal, with promises on both sides to keep the conditions of the agreement (Deut 5–6). Another way is to see the Jewish people as a nation ruled by their God, but for at least some of their history through the agency of a human king who acts on behalf of God (1 Sam 8; Ps 2). Especially during times when there was no Jewish king and they were under foreign rulers or other systems of government they began to look forward to a future time when God would deliver them from their enemies and set up a lasting era of peace and security under an ideal king (Is 11; Ezek 37). One might think of that era as coming at the end of ordinary history and being perfect in character. At the same time there developed the idea of resurrection and the sharing of the righteous people of former ages in this eternal Kingdom (Dan 12). So the Kingdom came to be thought of as a future realm on a renewed earth, in effect the realisation of the present rule of God in heaven (doubtless conceptualised as up above the earth) on earth.

The teaching of Jesus assumed this broad context and structure of thought. He spoke of the Kingdom of God, sometimes of the age to come, sometimes of eternal life, as this future rule and realm of God (Mk 10.17–31). Metaphorically it could be thought of as a house where people would dwell with God, with sinners excluded and pictured as gazing longingly at it through the windows (Lk 13.22–30) or being in a place of punishment (Mt 25.31–46) or simply being destroyed (Lk 19.27; Jn 3.16). Sometimes Jesus spoke of this future realm as being near in time; he saw himself as living towards the end of time and preparing people so that they would be qualified to enter it (Lk 12.35–40). So when the good news is summed up as 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news' (Mk 1.15), this could be appropriately understood in these terms. The Kingdom can be thought of as coming (Mk 9.1); it can also be thought of as like a building to be entered (Mt 7.21–23). The teaching of Jesus is a statement of entrance conditions.

However, the total picture is not so simple. 'The Kingdom of God is at hand' could also be understood to mean 'the Kingdom of God has drawn very close' or 'has arrived'. And there is a whole set of sayings by Jesus which suggest powerfully that he saw the Kingdom as somehow already happening in the course of his mission (Lk 17.20–21). Jesus accomplished

'mighty works', mostly healings of illnesses and disabilities and release from demon-possession, which were interpreted as the powerful deeds of God but also as signs of the Kingdom (Lk 11.14–20). There is a paradoxical juxtaposition of teaching about the Kingdom as future and about it being already here. Radical solutions to the situation generally consist either in denying that Jesus spoke in one way or the other (usually the 'present' sayings are denied to him) or in reinterpreting what he said (one solution being to argue that the 'future' sayings are really timeless and refer to God's present rule in heaven). Other ways include suggesting that the present sayings could be understood to refer to signs that the future Kingdom is near at hand, just as when a procession is preceded by outriders or we see a trailer for a forthcoming movie. The better way is to recognise that the phrase refers to the ongoing divine sovereign and gracious activity that is manifested both in the present Kingdom and the future Kingdom.

The early Church certainly recognised this ongoing activity. Jesus had brought people into a new situation in which they received special blessings from God that delivered them from the power of evil (i.e. their biggest enemy; Mt 6.9–13) and restored the covenant relationship that they had one-sidedly broken (Mt 26.27–29). They enjoyed a new status as the flock or children of God (Lk 12.31–32). In short, the blessings traditionally associated with the Kingdom of God were already happening (Lk 7.18–28). This had already been the case during the lifetime of Jesus. Thus messiahship had been transformed (as we have already noted); Jesus was the messiah, not just a messiah-designate, he was the monarch rather than the Prince of Wales; the blessings were real (the sick really were healed). What was absent was the establishment of a political realm coupled with the military defeat of its enemies (both external and internal; Mt 5.38–48). The death of Jesus could have seemed to destroy all such illusions about the Kingdom being present and powerful. But it was accompanied by the mightiest of acts, a resurrection which could only have come about by the hand of God; that confirmed that God had made Jesus both Messiah and Lord (Acts 2.22–36). Increasingly it was realised that Jesus was so closely related to their ancestral God, whom they increasingly came to understand (with Jesus to teach them) as God the Father, that he should be recognised as God the Son (Rom 1.1–4); and similarly they recognised the continuing spiritual power that was at work in their midst as the work of the Spirit of God. In other words,

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the kingly rule of God was continuing after the lifetime of Jesus, although it remained a spiritual phenomenon with visible results in the changed, godly and good lives of people and the growth of their communities or congregations (or churches). The present time could be seen as a period of overlap during which the Kingdom of God spreads over the world while the kingdom of evil coexists with it (Mt 13.24–30, 36–43); but this uneasy period of transition (Rev 1.9) will one day come to an end with the full establishment of the Kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the physical universe (1 Cor 15.20–28).

So the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus is the term to express this kingly, powerful intervention of God in the world through Jesus. His Kingdom does exist in the world and its evidence is seen in the groups of people who acknowledge his rule, however imperfectly they may do so. The Church is not to be identified as the Kingdom (a dangerous step taken in the middle ages that still survives in some areas!) but is the community created by the kingly rule of God. The Kingdom has come, yet not in its fullness, but what we have is the real thing and not a substitute.

Through all this the understanding of the concept changes. It is seen to be present and not just something awaited in the future or entered by death. It is not brought about and established by military force. Rather, it spreads in the loving, self-sacrificing way demonstrated by Jesus himself. It lacks the pomp and show and pride and other accoutrements of worldly kingdoms and is for the poor and needy, and its members seek nothing for themselves. True greatness lies in service, and indeed the idea of greatness has no place in it. It involves the great act of redemption and reconciliation brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Consequently, as the Church went about its mission the language shifted decisively. The very term 'Kingdom' was marginalised, and such terms as salvation and eternal life replaced it. Even the term 'messiah', which was a Jewish word, became a name by which Jesus was known, and its functional implications were expressed by terms like 'Lord' (which Jesus shared with God the Father and which ultimately was expressive of his divine identity).

The concept, however, remains theologically and practically significant. Granted that the biblical message is largely concerned with the plight of humankind and

God's gracious action to deliver them, we are reminded that the ultimate objective is the establishment of the rule of God and the overcoming of the evil opposition to him. The sovereign position of God is affirmed. The individualism that tends to creep into the perfectly correct recognition of our individual needs and of what the Lord has done for me personally (Ps 66.16–20) must not blind us to the way in which God is to be honoured and worshipped as king. To speak of his rule also emphasises that he is the lawgiver and that his purpose is to establish a society which is obedient to his commandments. The easily misunderstood formula 'love God and do what you like' must give way to an enquiry into the full implications of what it means in practice to love God: 'this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commandments' (2 Jn 6). The people of God are called to live by the laws of God: what does it mean in practice to live as citizens of his Kingdom in the midst of earthly kingdoms and the kingdom of Satan? How do we follow the example of Jesus who announced the arrival of the rule of God as a peaceable Kingdom and eschewed the path of violence? What might it mean to take the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7; cf. Lk 6.20–49) seriously as an exposition of Kingdom-living?

It may be that all of these points arise from time to time in the Bible without direct links to the concept of the Kingdom, but they are certainly integral to it as a central way of expressing the main concern of Scripture; a Kingdom-centred approach to theology and practice may act as a corrective to what can easily become a human-centred outlook and remind us of our chief end, 'to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever' (the *Shorter Catechism*).

And, finally, the practical question for communication in today's world: if the early Christians tended to move away from the vocabulary of 'Kingdom' (but without surrendering the concept itself), what do we need to do to communicate the concept in a situation where kingship is outmoded? 'The presidency of God'? Heaven forbid! But what are we to do to speak meaningfully today? ■