

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church

Lake Worth, Florida

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“WHAT CREDIBILITY CAN 'KINGDOM OF HEAVEN' HAVE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?”

a mini-lecture/homily

In last Sunday's *New York Times* an editorial commented, “Today's financial crises were years in the making, as Americans, awash in tax cuts and easy money, lived beyond their means to an unprecedented degree, and the Bush administration, while cutting taxes, pursued wars and vast new spending.” From what you and I learn from the media, multitudes of people are now in their own financial hells, *sometimes* self-inflicted by greed. Most of what we could list as deficiencies or evils in the world or in our own American culture are of human origins. Certainly there is little or nothing operative in any global society that is functioning as God would have it! Each and every segment of human living has always been flawed.

In his day, Jesus faced adverse cultural conditions, too, though differing here and there from ours. Roman political corruption and social injustice were rampant; the poor castes (which were the majority of people) had no opportunity of bettering themselves; they were hopelessly stuck wherever they were. Most religious leaders were focused on preserving the past and “going by the book” with stifling customs and regulations. Agents of godly genuine change were rare.

Jesus entered the scene as a faithful Jew but as a severe critic of the *status quo*. He was very much concerned with justice and religious basics. His disciples, including us today, believe that he embodied God's Word; he was God's Exemplar of how the Creator intended human beings to live. In the line of the great Hebrew prophets before him, and more than that, Jesus taught again and again about the great chasm between God's intentions for humanity and the lesser ways in which human beings had decided to live.

One of Christ's primary ways of teaching was by the use of parables, such as those we heard in tonight's reading. Biblical parables come in a variety of literary forms (*e.g.*, proverbs, riddles, and similes). Tonight's are picturesque ways of illustrating “snapshot truths” about the ideal human society – figuratively called the “Kingdom of Heaven.” (Incidentally, “Kingdom of God” has the same meaning, but tonight's author, Matthew, was showing special sensitivity to the Jews for whom he was especially writing by not using the sacred name “God.”) Although the parables are drawn from Jesus' daily life, they do not necessarily portray normal, everyday actions. On the contrary, at times one encounters both exaggeration and unexpected behavior.

The “Kingdom of Heaven” will result from a transformation, a transfiguration, of human living into the ideal community; its inhabitants would be the perfected “people of God” who lived righteously in the Covenant with the Lord God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as their “King.” The basic intent of the Kingdom theme is to affirm God's reign in all aspects of personal and social life.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have speculated about where this ideal community would be located: on a perfected planet earth or in a different, invisible dimension. As well, a host of related questions and issues have been contemplated within the New Testament and afterwards. On the other hand, some Christians propose that Jesus was not referring to a place at all, but a process: heaven not as a destination but as a journey. In other words, heaven in this way of thinking is not a focus on a place where we end up but an ongoing process in which we participate. Yet, still, the process has to be somewhere or in some “state of being”! As you can see, there has been much speculation about the Kingdom of God by faithful Christians, and the proposals vary and often contradict each other!

You may recall that Jesus' own people expected a Messiah, someone anointed by God, who would usher in a new age of peace. He would be an effective military leader and a revolutionary political and religious authority. Although Jesus was not that kind of a leader, his followers believed that he was a more profound version of God's Messiah. Building on their Jewish notion, they believed that his mission was to transform the hearts and minds of people, so that, with a ripple effect, a spreading of love and justice would inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, the kingdom of heaven began as an inward reality that

would grow outwardly to govern the whole earth until ultimately the Kingdom of Heaven would overcome the kingdoms of the earth.

In tonight's reading we hear about this Kingdom in parable forms:

The parable of the very small mustard seed teaches that a lowly beginning is not inconsistent with a great and glorious destiny. The combination of two seemingly incongruent facts—the tiny seed and a large tree for birds—illustrates the contrast between the experience of Jesus and his followers in the present and their expectations of the future. This parable sets *present reality* and *future hopes* side by side and, furthermore portrays the magnificent end as inherent in the mundane beginning. Just as the seed produces the tree, so that which is inconspicuously present in Jesus' ministry will become the universal reign of God.

The parable of the rising yeast also tells of a small, veiled thing that becomes large through an organic process. These similarities signal an identity of theme. Both teach that the coming of the Kingdom begins not with a grand spectacle but a hidden presence. In this way the character and nature of Jesus' ministry, including its failure in Israel, can be better understood.

Then follows three parables of the treasure, pearl, and net. The first two of these parables concern finding the kingdom (represented by the treasure and the pearl) and doing everything possible to obtain it. The focus is on the present, not the future, and on the actions of believers, not unbelievers. The point is that although the kingdom is hidden, it can be found; and when it is, one should do whatever is necessary to obtain it.

The reading ends with the major point that the disciples have indeed understood Jesus' discourse and so qualify as disciples instructed in the truths of the Kingdom of Heaven. Although tonight's reading has many applications, fundamentally Jesus taught that the true messianic transformation had begun in his ministry and would become established decisively in God's good time at some point in the future.

The title of this sermon is "What Credibility Can 'Kingdom Of Heaven' Have In The 21st Century?" Literally understood, these Kingdom parables can become a hodgepodge of puzzling fairy tales and impossible goals thought suitable by some naïve Christians both past and present.

Understood figuratively, the parables can powerfully urge faithful Christians to incorporate Christ's teachings as internal kernels of truth of the Kingdom; you and I are to apply daily the Good News of Christ *as fully as we can* in our individual circumstances. That is, we live out our baptism as children of God as we reside in the flawed "kingdoms of this world" - in full knowledge that the perfected "Kingdom of Heaven" will be established by God in whatever ways he chooses and whenever he chooses. Carrying a measure of the Kingdom within us, we journey onwards individually and as a Church that attempts to influence public policies to grow in Christ's love and service. We become more and more individuals and a people of God who are *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

I would like to conclude with one concrete, *credible* example of one Christian applying his internal "Kingdom-oriented" beliefs. This past week at the Lambeth Conference in England, our Bishop Leo Frade - in a march of 600 bishops and their spouses - had controversially wrapped a rainbow flag around his sign (see picture below, center front, with Miami baseball cap) because, he said, "when we talk about justice and mercy, we need to remember that gay and lesbian persons are discriminated against by the church and the government." When Bishop Frade returns to our diocese, he will be both praised and condemned! Let us be among those who praise him!



A READING FROM MATTHEW

13: 31-33, 44-52

Jesus told them another story:

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a farmer plants a mustard seed in a field. Although it is the smallest of all seeds, it grows larger than any garden plant and becomes a tree. Birds even come and nest on its branches.

Jesus also said:

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a woman mixes a little yeast into three big batches of flour. Finally, all the dough rises.

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when someone finds a treasure hidden in a field and buries it again. A person like that is happy and goes and sells everything in order to buy that field.

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a shop owner is looking for fine pearls. After finding a very valuable one, the owner goes and sells everything in order to buy that pearl.

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a net is thrown into a lake and catches all kinds of fish. When the net is full, it is dragged to the shore, and the fishermen sit down to separate the fish. They keep the good ones, but throw the bad ones away. That's how it will be at the end of time. Angels will come and separate the evil people from the ones who have done right. Then those evil people will be thrown into a flaming furnace, where they will cry and grit their teeth in pain.

Jesus asked his disciples if they understood all these things. They said, "Yes, we do."

So he told them, "Every student of the Scriptures who becomes a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like someone who brings out new and old treasures from the storeroom."

The Word of the Lord!

ADDITIONAL NOTES

from various sources

The kingdom of God is perhaps the central theme of the New Testament. As heir to all the preceding, the New Testament presents the kingdom as one of three interrelated concepts: a theocracy, an actual political kingdom ruled by God; a spiritual reality, an inner attitude of voluntary acceptance of the rule of

God; and, par excellence, the individual who placed himself in total and perfect submission to God—namely Jesus Christ himself, who in fact personifies the kingdom.

The gospel of Matthew uses the expression “kingdom of God” only four times (Matt. 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43), preferring the alternate designation “kingdom of heaven.” The latter usage occurs thirty-four times, often where the Synoptic parallels read “kingdom of God.” Although not found elsewhere in the New Testament, “kingdom of heaven” is a literal translation of Aram. *malkû t̄ā* □ *dismayyā* □, a circumlocution deriving from postexilic Judaism’s reluctance to use the name of God (cf. Targ. *Onk.* Exod. 15:18; Targ. Isa. 24:23); Matthew employs the term out of sensitivity toward his Jewish-Christian audience.

The phrase “kingdom of God,” a freer translation of the Aramaic expression, is regularly used by most of the other New Testament writers; it occurs fourteen times in Mark, twenty-two in Luke, twice in John, six times in Acts, eight in Paul’s epistles, and once in Revelation.

The rabbis used the expression “taking on the yoke of the kingdom of God” to indicate one who was in perfect obedience to the law (Mishnah Ber. 2:2, 5); to them the kingdom of God was a spiritual reality rather than a political system. It is this understanding of the kingdom that predominates in Jesus’ teachings as recorded by each of the Evangelists (e.g., John 18:36). The coming of the kingdom is likened to the growth of a garden herb (Matt. 13:31) or that of sown seed (Mark 4:3–20). The kingdom itself is a treasure, the value of which exceeds all other possessions (Matt. 13:44–46). It is this inner kingdom, this voluntary acceptance of the rule of God (cf. John 3:3, 5), of which Jesus speaks (cf. Mark 9:1; 10:14; 12:34).

By extension, the “kingdom of God” also refers to Jesus Christ, the One who was in perfect submission to God. It is as such that the kingdom is “at hand” (Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9, 11). Some evidence suggests that from this perspective the phrase serves as a divine name; accordingly, Jesus’ statement that the kingdom of God was present in him is a virtual declaration of divinity (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20; cf. Targ. Isa. 40:9).

Paul’s epistles reflect identical concepts of the kingdom of God. The apostle refers to an inner, spiritual reality when he argues that the kingdom (in the sense of “perfect obedience to God,” as in the rabbis) does not consist of food and drink (Rom. 14:17), and his frequent use of the expression “in Christ” may be an abbreviation of “in the kingdom of Christ” as a locative for believers (cf. 5:5). Nevertheless, Paul’s assertion that the kingdom of God will not be inherited by the unrighteous (1 Cor. 6:9–10; Gal. 5:21) seems more in keeping with the apocalyptic writers’ vision of a future kingdom. Indeed, his emphasis on the believer’s “hope of glory” (Rom. 5:2) seems to indicate a future possibility realized only after suffering the suffering and persecution of this world (vv. 3–5).

The theme of the book of Revelation, which builds upon the apocalypticism of the intertestamental period, is the establishment of the kingdom of God upon earth as a political reality (Rev. 11:15). Even though the precise term occurs only once (12:10), other expressions convey the same concept (e.g., “kingdom”; 1:6; “throne”; 4:2; “reign”; 11:17; “King of kings and Lord of lords”; 19:16; cf. 17:14). Certainly the kingdom of God as depicted in Revelation enters the world with none of the subtlety suggested by other New Testament books. It appears suddenly and violently with war (9:1–12) and plague (vv. 13–19). Society is split into two opposing forces, the people of the kingdom of God (6:9; 7:9) and all other “inhabitants of the earth” (3:10; 6:10, 15).

Aram. Aramaic

cf. compare, see

Targ. Targum

Onk. Onkelos

vv. verses

The kingdom of God is thus a broad concept with many divergent strands. The writers of the New Testament synthesized to a great extent the prevailing views of their day. Like the rabbis, they perceived that the kingdom was present wherever people allowed God to rule in their hearts and minds. But the followers of Jesus were unwilling to settle for a simple spiritualization of the kingdom. Rather, the kingdom began as an inward reality that would grow to dominate the whole earth until ultimately the kingdom "of our Lord and of his Christ" would swallow up the kingdoms of the earth. Then God would dispense judgment and personally rule over his people, assisted by those who voluntarily accepted his kingdom: the poor, the weak—those who became Christians.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The kingdom of God is one of the most fruitful yet controversial concepts in Christian theology. It has been employed to uphold the status quo, and it has been a revolutionary ideal used to break social forms and customs. Although appropriated from Judaism, it was radically transformed by Jesus and so reinterpreted by the early Christian community.

In the New Testament the concept signifies the sovereignty or kingly rule of God. Its basic intent is to affirm the fact that God reigns in all aspects of personal and social life. It is not a general, but a unique, kind of rule or reign. Whereas Judaism encountered the rule of God through obedience to the Law and looked forward to the complete establishment of God's rule, the New Testament asserted that in a new and peculiar way the kingdom of God had already come.

Jesus said that if he cast out demons through the power of God, "then the kingdom of God has come upon you." The Gospel of Mark takes its departure from the assertion that the time has reached fulfillment and that the kingdom of God has come—"repent and believe the good news." This claim is not merely a statement of living under God's commandments and so living under godly rule. Rather, it is a new manifestation of God's power and sovereignty in which God's nature, power, and will are brought to bear.

The early Christian community believed that in Jesus of Nazareth the Christ (or Messiah) was encountered and that God's kingdom was made manifest. People could either repent and believe or they could reject it, but regardless of human response, the Kingdom had come. This motif is central for Mark and John and is strongly stated in Matthew and Luke. That for which Israel had hoped and prayed had come to pass in Jesus the Christ. God's freedom and rule expressed itself in a new and an amazing way in his life, death, and resurrection.

Nevertheless, the New Testament also makes references to the kingdom of God as still to come. Some references are apocalyptic visions, and others are predictions about future particular historical events. Together they provide a source to interpret the kingdom of God as still to come. At different periods in the church's history, stress has often been laid on the future dimension of the Kingdom. This point of view moved in one of two directions: It either tended to uphold the status quo under the direction of the church, or it tended to revolutionize the forces of society in the name of the coming Kingdom.

The first position was that taken by the Roman Catholic Church. It tended to identify the kingdom of God with the church as opposed to the world, which it considered the kingdom of Satan. Insofar as the world was good, however, it was under the direction of the kingdom of God through the church. This life was but preparation for a life to come that would be lived in the presence of God. Meanwhile, humanity's relation to God's rule was mediated through the church. Emphasis was not upon a fresh breaking in of the Kingdom or upon a final cataclysmic judgment of the world.

Throughout Christian history another interpretation of the kingdom of God constantly reappeared. It did not believe that the Kingdom was really present, and particularly it did not believe that the kingdom of God could be equated with the church. It stressed the Kingdom as imminent or as about to break in upon the world. The Montanist movement represented such a protest against the early Catholic church's attempt to spiritualize and indefinitely postpone the coming of the kingdom of God. During the Middle Ages various protests, those of the Franciscan Spiritualists being the most thoroughgoing, were made on behalf of an immediate return of the Christ, bringing with him God's kingdom. Wherever this interpretation of the kingdom of God appears, it bemeans the role of the church and pronounces a negative judgment against culture and society. It condemns social institutions as instruments of the kingdom of Satan. It sees little or

no relation between God's rule and life as it is being lived at a given moment. The object is not to transform life within history so as to bring it into conformity with an ever-present dynamic will of God. Rather, the object is to negate history through an all-encompassing judgment, as God ushers in the divine Kingdom through a new heaven and new earth.

The very concept of kingdom of God is so dynamic that it constantly brings forth a series of options. The fact that the symbol is that of a kingdom implies a close relationship to analogous structures of life and history. Of necessity, such a concept must deal concretely with the day-to-day affairs of living men and women. Furthermore, this symbol, by its very nature, must include the personal and social aspects of life, since to be less inclusive would do violence to the symbol of "kingdom" or of "rule."

Insofar as it is the kingdom of God, the symbol stresses the freedom and the sovereignty of God the creator, sustainer, and the redeemer. It transcends the totality of this life, both personal and social, and demands that the Christian take a stand against this life. It appears as a completion of this life, as a fulfillment, as the final meaning of history; yet it is God's kingdom, God's work and not people's action. In this sense the kingdom of God is never the inevitable consequence or development of human life and history.

Thus, the concept of the kingdom of God posed a number of the central theological problems with which Christian theology still wrestles. If one affirms that the kingdom of God has already come, then one must make clear what this means. How is the kingdom of God in operation? Is it through a series of laws or commands? Are these primarily moral and personal or are they ontological? How is God's rule to be discovered in and for culture or the state? Is the kingdom of God directly operative in personal and social life, or is it mediated through the church or through other forces? Can it be mediated differently through the church on the one hand and through the structures of life on the other? Is it possible that the kingdom of God is already present as a special perspective through which humans are called to new life? If so, what is the content of this perspective, and on what is it based and how is it maintained?

If one affirms that the kingdom of God is present, but that its real meaning is hidden and the Kingdom is still to come, then one faces an additional set of creative possibilities. How is the kingdom of God to come? Is it to mean the end of all history as we now know it? If so, what is the relation of the kingdom of God to history and the partial meaning of life as one now experiences it? Is the kingdom of God related to some kind of perfection of our present social and cultural order? How is the coming of the kingdom of God to be related to the life of the church? Does the church fully embody the kingdom of God? Does it not also embody the forces of evil? Does not the church, in some sense, have to be the bearer of the kingdom of God? In doing this, does not the church have to embody the presence of the Kingdom and yet point beyond itself to God and the fulfillment of the Kingdom?

At present, theological discussion remains torn between two basic emphases. One stresses the reality of the presence of the kingdom of God transforming this life through judgment and mercy. The Kingdom is here as a new reality in life, but it is engaged in a life-and-death struggle with satanic forces and demonic powers. History is thus a great stage on which the drama of redemption is fought. However, the battle, though desperately real, has been won in the victory of Jesus the Christ. History has a positive meaning because it has a beginning, center, and fulfillment. But in and of itself history has no meaning. Only in relation to the dynamic presence of the kingdom of God can it be seen as meaningful. Thus the minor motif is the kingdom of God still to come.

The other point of view stresses the Kingdom yet to come. Though it is recognized that God rules, for God is sovereign, the demonic forces are so great that nothing but suffering can be anticipated. In theory history must be important, but in actuality one cannot expect much from it. Only a new divine manifestation of salvific power will suffice. The kingdom of God really has yet to come in any power of genuine significance; so God's judgment is expected, at any moment when the kingdom of God will be ushered in.

Both emphases recognize the dual stress of the kingdom of God: It is here; it is yet to come. Each emphasizes one point as a major motif and the other point as a minor motif. Between these two poles the present interpretation moves. No longer does the optimistic view persist that the unfolding of history itself is bringing closer the final stages of the kingdom of God. It is no longer understood as an evolutionary concept or primarily as a moral-ethical concept. That was the view of the Social Gospel in American life. Recent developments in Latin American liberation theology represent a similar concern to relate the concept of the

kingdom of God to the entirety of the social situation but using a dialectical method rather than holding to an evolutionary or a progressive unfolding. Thus the concept continues to function in a creative way in current theology.