

“The Kingdom of God is at hand” by Peter McVerry

Jesus came proclaiming: “**The Kingdom of God is at hand.**” So to understand what Jesus was about, we have to ask: what on earth – or in Heaven – did Jesus mean by “The Kingdom of God is at hand”? And what did Jesus mean when he said: “**the Kingdom belongs to the poor.**”

Today, most Christians presume that the Kingdom of God to which Jesus was referring was a Kingdom in another place and another time, a kingdom in Heaven.

Jesus coming “that we may have life, and have it to its fullness” is understood to refer to eternal life and entering eternal life in Heaven becomes the focus and objective of our relationship with Jesus. Jesus came, then, to teach us what we have to do to earn a place in that Kingdom.

Such a spirituality is inward-looking and self-centred; our eyes are focused on Heaven and what *I* must do to get there. But the spirituality of the Gospels is outward looking, other-centred; our eyes are focused on others and how we can love them.

Perhaps it’s all St. Matthew’s fault. He kept called it “The Kingdom of Heaven”. He was referring to the Kingdom of God, but in deference to the Jewish culture, within which many of the Christians to whom he was writing had grown up, he was reluctant to use the word “God” out of respect for the awesomeness and holiness of God. So Matthew uses, instead, the term “Kingdom of Heaven.” But Matthew was not referring to a “spiritual”, other-worldly kingdom. No, Matthew was talking about the “Rule of Heaven,” or the “Rule of God”, here and now, on earth.

The Kingdom of Herod

In the Western world today, we are not used to talk about Kingdoms. The kingdoms that continue to exist, like the United Kingdom, are kingdoms only in name. But the people amongst whom Jesus was born were well accustomed to talk about kingdoms; after all they lived in one, the Kingdom of Caesar. They would clearly have understood Jesus to be talking, not about a Kingdom in Heaven, but a Kingdom here on earth over which God, not Caesar, would reign.

In the Kingdom in which they now lived, Herod had been appointed by Caesar as Tetrarch (or King) to keep control of the territory of Galilee on behalf of Caesar, which Herod did with utter ruthlessness. Herod had no problem slaughtering all the male children under the age of two, one of whom, he had been told, would become King of Israel and was therefore a threat to his position. Child protection policies were not a priority in Herod’s kingdom! A few years before Jesus was born, Herod had burnt forty Jews to death for trying to lead a protest against Roman occupation. When Jesus was three or four years old, still learning to walk, two thousand Jews were crucified in the city of Sepphoris, only about five miles from Nazareth where Jesus was living, and its inhabitants led off into slavery, as a reprisal for an attempted revolt against Caesar.

Jesus came to a people who lived in a Kingdom where they were cruelly oppressed by Caesar and his Empire.

Again, in the Kingdom of Caesar in which they now lived, the vast majority lived at a subsistence level. They lived from day to day, never sure where tomorrow’s food would come from. When Jesus asked his followers to pray: “**Give us this day our daily bread,**” this was a real prayer for them, as it is today for those millions living on the edge of starvation. For most of us, however, it is a prayer whose meaning is purely metaphorical.

Many also lived on the edge of destitution: those with infirmities, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, the lepers. They had no life, they simply survived from day to day, forced to beg just to stay alive, a very precarious existence.

Others were rejected and unwanted and marginalised: those who were considered to be sinners, with no regard for the Law. They were despised and ostracised.

A small minority, perhaps 7-8%, lived lives of ostentatious wealth, living in mansions, with no concern for the poor and the hungry around them. These were the royal court, the priests who became wealthy through the selling of sacrificial offerings in the Temple, the rich landowners, many of them Herod's friends, who had accumulated large tracts of land by the simple policy of confiscating land from small landowners, often on the pretext that they were unable to pay the exorbitant tax that Herod demanded of them. But Herod didn't need much pretext, he had absolute power to do whatever he wanted, and there was no court of appeal.

This was God's chosen people, oppressed both from without and from within, a majority of whom were struggling to survive and to maintain any sense of their own dignity: rejected by their fellow human beings and told that they had also been rejected by God. This was not what God had in mind when God liberated the people from Egypt and led them into the promised land. This was not a people over whom God could possibly want to reign.

The Kingdom of God

And Jesus came proclaiming a new Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, over whom God would happily reign. And Jesus told people stories about this new Kingdom of God that was coming.

Jesus talked about the rich man ¹ "who feasted sumptuously every day and was dressed in the finest linen" and who couldn't even be bothered to gather up the crumbs that fell from his table to give them to the poor man at his gate. The people Jesus was talking to knew exactly, some from their own experience, what he was talking about. And when Jesus went on to say that Lazarus would be welcomed into the Kingdom of God, you can imagine them looking at one another and nodding their heads in approval. Their own religious leaders were telling them that they had been rejected by God and here was Jesus telling them about a God, a God of compassion, who would welcome them into God's Kingdom. No wonder they could listen to him all day. This was indeed good news to the poor and rejected.

And when Jesus talked about the rich landowner² who had a massive harvest and said to himself: "What I am to do? I know, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones" without any consideration for those around him who were hungry, the people Jesus was talking to knew exactly what part of town these fellows lived in. And when Jesus said that God is going to require his soul tonight, you can imagine them smiling with approval. This was indeed a God they wanted to believe in.

These were not "made-up" stories; Jesus was telling it as it was. And he was telling them that, in the Kingdom of God that was coming, their lives were going to be very different.

And when Jesus talked about the labourers³ who waiting in the market square all day, hoping to get a few hours work, they knew exactly what Jesus was talking about: some of them, no doubt, had "been there, done that". And when Jesus said that even those who were given work at the eleventh hour also received the same wage, one denarius - enough to feed their family for the day - they were astounded; they never heard of any rich vineyard owner who actually cared whether his workers had enough food or not! And when Jesus tells them that the rich vineyard owner is like God, they are filled with wonder; could God really be a

¹ Luke 16 v 19-31

² Luke 12 v 13-21

³ Matt 20 v 1-16

God that cares, that cares about them and whether their families will get fed? They want to hear more about this wonderful God.

But Jesus didn't just *tell* people about the God of compassion. When Jesus healed the blind and the lame and the lepers, who were told by their own religious leaders that they were cursed by God, in the very act of being healed they *experienced* the God of compassion that Jesus revealed. This was a God beyond all their expectations. No wonder those who were cured went off and told everyone what Jesus had done, even when Jesus had instructed them to tell no-one⁴. How could you not go and tell everyone about this God of compassion and love?

And when Jesus ate with sinners⁵, who were told by their own religious leaders that they were forsaken by the God of the Law, in their table fellowship with Jesus they *experienced* the unconditional forgiveness of the God of compassion. This was not just "Good News," this was extraordinary news, beyond all their expectations.

And when Jesus reached out, in friendship, to the unwanted and marginalised, who were told by their own religious leaders that God had rejected them, they *experienced* God's acceptance of them. This is what they had not even dared to hope for, and now it was becoming a reality for them.

Jesus is telling those who came to listen about a Kingdom where those on the margins of society will be welcomed, respected, and valued instead of being rejected and unwanted; where people will reach out to the poor, and share what they have, so that their needs will be met, instead of being ignored and despised by those who had the resources to meet their needs. In this new Kingdom, people will live in a totally different way to the way they now had to live, people will live by totally different values to the values of the society around them. In this new Kingdom, their King will be, not the brutal Herod or the warmongering Caesar, but God, a God of compassion, a God who cares.

The God who liberated the people from their oppression in Pharaoh's Kingdom is now coming, indeed has already come, to liberate the people once again, this time from their suffering in Caesar's Kingdom, which oppressed them with the collusion of the priests and religious aristocracy.

So they wanted to know: where was this new Kingdom to be found? And what did they have to do to enter this Kingdom?

The early Christian community

The early Church, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, understood that they were to continue the mission of Jesus, to reveal the God of compassion by *being* the compassion of God to each other and to the world. In this community, the Kingdom of God that Jesus had promised was close at hand, was now present in our world.

I read the Gospels now, not as instructions to me as to how I should live my life according to the moral laws of God which Jesus revealed and thereby be rewarded with a place in Heaven, but as instructions to the early Christian community – and therefore to us, as the Christian community in our time - as to how we are to live together in order to be the Kingdom of God on earth.

A community of radical solidarity

⁴ Mark 1 v 44-45

⁵ Matt 9 v 9-13

And so I read the story of the feeding of the five thousand people. Five thousand people spent the whole day listening to Jesus. In the evening, the disciples had to go up to Jesus and say: “Jesus, would you ever shut up! The people are hungry. Send them off to the towns and villages around, so that they can get something to eat.” The whole point of the story, for the early Christian community, lies in Jesus’ answer to the disciples:

“No, you give them something to eat yourselves.”⁶

The Christian community understood that this was an instruction from Jesus to them. They were to ensure that they reached out to those amongst them who were in need and not leave their needs unmet.

The Kingdom of God is where God lives, where God is to be found. In the famous Last Judgement scene⁷, we read:

“I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was in hospital and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to see me. Welcome into the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

Perhaps Matthew is not talking about judgement at all. Perhaps Matthew is describing *a community where God is present*. A community which reaches out to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, in other words, to meet the needs of all, a community which expresses the compassion of God in its life together, is a community where you will find present the God of compassion. “Welcome into the Kingdom.”

But a community which fails to reach out to meet the needs of all is a community where God, the God of compassion, is absent.

“I was hungry and you did not give me to eat, I was thirsty and you did not give me to drink, I was naked and you did not clothe me, I was in hospital and in prison and you did not visit me...Depart from me.”

And so we have the story of the rich young man⁸ who comes to Jesus to ask what he must do to enter the Kingdom of God (“to inherit eternal life”). Jesus tells him he must keep the Law. He says he has done that from his earliest days. And Jesus looks on him and loves him (Mark 10 v21). Jesus tells him that there is still one thing he lacks; he has to sell everything he owns and distribute the money to the poor, and then come and follow Jesus. (ie. Join the Christian community). And he is unable to do so and goes away sad.

Here is a young man who is every vocation director’s dream – a good young man, who has kept the Law, is very motivated and idealistic and comes to Jesus wanting to know what more he can do. And Jesus will not allow him to be a follower because his refusal to share what he has is a total contradiction to everything the Kingdom is about.

The early Christians understood that, to enter the Christian community, the Kingdom of God, a person took on the responsibility of being the compassion of God to one other. Hence, they were to live together in radical solidarity with each other, loving each other with a love that was willing to share everything for the sake of those in need. Just as Jesus had

⁶ Luke 9 v 13

⁷ Matt 25 v 31-46

⁸ Luke 18 v 18 - 23

given up everything, including what was most precious to him, his own life, for our sake, so they, as followers of Jesus were to be prepared to give up everything, even what may be most precious to them, for the sake of their brothers and sisters. They understood that all they had were gifts, given to them by God, not so that they could have a good life and enjoy themselves, (like the guy in the Kingdom of Caesar who built bigger barns to store his harvest) but so that they (now living in the Kingdom of God) could use them for the benefit of others. They were, therefore, to share their resources, their time, their talents, their skills for the sake of those who needed them.

A community of radical inclusiveness

One of the characteristics of Jesus' life that was remembered and passed down from generation to generation of Christians in those early communities was the fact that Jesus shared table fellowship with sinners.

“Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.”⁹

This caused Jesus endless difficulties. “How could this man be from God, when he associates with the enemies of God, those who do not keep the Law?” righteous people, good living people, asked.

Seven simple words that any 8-year old could understand. But they couldn't understand the *meaning* of them.

How would the early Christian community have understood these words when they heard them read at the Sunday Eucharist?

Jesus. They knew Jesus to be God;

Jesus ate. God eating would bring to mind the Kingdom of God in Heaven, which was often portrayed as a meal at which God presides.

“Master, who shall be at the feast in the Kingdom of God?” (Luke 14 v 15)

And who will be present at that meal? Why, the tax collectors and the sinners, those who were excluded and unwanted here on earth in the Kingdom of Caesar. And so they reasoned, if they will be welcomed amongst God's guests in the Kingdom of God in Heaven, then they should also be welcomed in their community, the Kingdom of God on earth.

The early community understood that this radical inclusiveness, revealed by the actions of Jesus, was normative for their community and life together. In their community, no-one was to be unwanted, rejected or marginalised. Everyone has the same dignity of being a child of God and that dignity was to be recognised and affirmed by the way in which the Christian community reached out to them and accepted them.

Conclusion

This man, Jesus of Nazareth, born two thousand years ago, was then, and is now, the revelation of God's hope for our world. In Jesus of Nazareth, the human and the divine have become one, forever inseparable. Other religions might tell us that we encounter God in sacred places, in temples, places of worship, but we Christians believe that, because of this man Jesus, we encounter God in other human beings.

⁹ Matt 9 v 9 -13

“In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.” (Matt 25 v 40)

And while other religions might tell us to worship God with sacred actions, with sacrifices, and prayers, we Christians, because of this man Jesus, worship God by loving God in each other, by caring, reaching out, to our fellow human beings.

“A give you a new commandment, love one another; you must love one another as I have loved you.” (John 13 v 34)

God’s dream, God’s hope for our world then, is that we might love one another as God has loved us, by reaching out to those who suffer, the poor, the homeless, the lonely, the sick, the rejected and the unwanted.

Jesus came to make God’s dream for our world a reality. To transform our world from where it is today to where God would like it to be tomorrow requires a revolution. That revolution is the Community of Christians, which Jesus called the Kingdom of God. We, that Community, have a lot of soul-searching, a lot of hard thinking to do. Does the life of this community reflect the vision of God for our world? Or would Jesus find the same inequalities, injustice and marginalisation in this community as he once found two thousand years ago? Does the life of the Christian community, and the relationships within it, challenge the values and practices of the wider society in which it exists, in a way that brings persecution and rejection from that society? Or does the Christian community sit comfortably in society, indistinguishable from it? Have we betrayed the trust that God has placed in us, have we rationalised away the Gospel to suit our own interests and comforts? Are we prepared for the radical conversion that would transform our relationships with each other, particularly with the poor and marginalized?

We are called to listen long and hard to the Gospel, to the call of the King who invites us to transform this world through a radical solidarity with all others, to follow him who gave his life for us by giving our own lives, and everything we have and are, for our brothers and sisters.

A call to a radical conversion that would revolutionize our world.

This self-sacrificing love for others has such radical consequences for the way we live together, that it threatens many in our society today, just as it did 2,000 years ago. This self-sacrificing love is incompatible with the inequalities of wealth and power that exist in our society and in our world.

God’s dream, of a world that loves with the radical unselfish love of God, is good news to some but bad news to others. Now, as then, there are those who seek to destroy God’s dream for our world. Then, Herod sought to destroy that dream by slaughtering the children; the religious authorities sought to destroy that dream by executing Jesus. Now, there are many who are attached to wealth and power, who feel threatened by God’s message of caring and sharing, of solidarity with the poor and the needy, of using power, not for self-serving purposes, but for serving others, who will resist God’s call to build a community of love.

Those who are poor, who are sick, in hospital, living alone, those in prison or homeless, those who are unemployed or struggling offer us, in their need, a great gift, in fact the greatest gift of all. *They invite us to open our hearts to include them in our love.* If we expand our hearts to include them in our love, we become more loving persons, and so we become more fully human and therefore more fully living. No greater gift than that can anyone offer us.

If Jesus Christ today is to offer hope to those who are struggling, who live on the edge, who feel unwanted, that hope is you and I. If we do not care and share, if we do not reach out, then there is no hope, and we will have destroyed, yet again, God's dream for our world. Imagine a community where no-one was poor, unless everyone was poor, where no-one was homeless, no-one lonely, no-one sick or alone without visitors, no one in prison who has been abandoned. Imagine a community where no-one felt rejected or marginalised, where everyone feels loved, valued and respected. Wouldn't such a community surely be the Kingdom of God on earth.