

Seek First the Kingdom

A reading in the theology of the Kingdom of God

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Introduction

I want to ask a simple question this morning of us all. What is it we live for? What is it we are prepared to die for? As a group of believers in Jesus Christ, what is the one unifying concept, one objective that we point to that makes sense of all the multitude of different longings, ambitions, traditions, passions, commitment and beliefs? Just before Jesus' passion begins in John's Gospel, as he prays for his followers to be one, what is the common ground that should mark them all out as his followers? It can't be our traditions, it is not our theologies, it is not to be discerned in any one form of church or practice. I want to suggest this morning that it is his Kingdom and seeing it brought in that is the thing that unites us all.

NT scholars pretty much universally agree that the core of Jesus' message was that of proclaiming the establishment of the KoG. Now, somewhere along the way we have stopped talking about 'The Kingdom' and much more frequently refer to his message as 'The Gospel'. I want to spend our time this morning looking at what he meant by that phrase the KoG. Understanding how to relate to the concept, why it is 'Good News' – perhaps to understand that by referring to his message as simply 'The Gospel' brings a mindset that often prevents us from understanding the richness of the concept of the Kingdom – a richness drawn from his illustrations, his actions and from continuity with some OT concepts, and then specifically how all this relates to us today as a group looking at missions in particular.

Isaiah 64:1 “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

We then see the writer of Mark's Gospel telling us of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Mark 1:9 marked at his baptism “As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

After this declaration of his identity and the 40 days in the desert that follow which marks Christ's wrestling with temptations before his mission, Mark immediately goes on to show Jesus starting his 3 year ministry. vs 14 “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come” he said. “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

This could be a synopsis of his message, although I believe that the writer did not intend us to read too much into it at this stage. The rest of the book unpacks what that the message is. What he does say is 'The KoG is near'. Not here. It must be a choice and in that sense it is near. It is not a kingdom that is forced 'here'. It is there to be grasped. It is accessed by repentance and believing that this is actually good news

For the last 100 years or so, the translation 'rule of God' has come to be frequently used instead of 'kingdom of God'. That sounds more dynamic: God is the Lord because he rules, and everything he rules over is his kingdom. I want to suggest that this is an unhelpful and limiting way of trying to understand the concept of the KoG. It has overtones of theocracy about it. It could in some ways be thought of as limiting - God rules over some people, not others, in some areas, not others and it is very easy to define where he does and does not rule based on a set of conditions that we can

understand. It also over-spiritualises the idea of the kingdom because it draws a line between people who claim to be subject to God's rule and those that do not.

If we open the NT, we find that it doesn't give a definition of the KoG at all. Jesus never explicitly explained 'the concept' of the kingdom. Jesus provided us with no old or new concept of the KoG at all. He brought God's kingdom himself. That is something very different. It is one thing to define how we should live, and quite another to live rightly. And so it is one thing to reduce the KoG to a definition, and another to experience it, to feel it, to see it, to sense it.

1 John 1.1 "That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands: the word of life".

If we want to understand the Kingdom, we must draw close not only to Jesus' teaching, but ALSO understand his compassion, and to see in his actions what it is to experience the Kingdom. I want to look at the KoG as Jesus brings it through four perspectives: his healing, his parables, the grace he shows to the outcast and his message to the poor.

1. Healing

The KoG is shown in the healing of a broken world. In the gospels the people surrounding Jesus are not shown as sinners but as people who are sick. They creep forward out of the shadows into which they have been pushed, and try to get close to Jesus. In Mark this effect is shown almost immediately after the start of his ministry. After he has preached in the synagogue in Capernaum, 1:32 "That evening at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons."

In a beautiful interweaving in the story of the mission to teach and works of compassion, Mark gives us the sense that Jesus' compassion for the sick was so strong that even though he knew it would cause problems for his teaching ministry he could not help himself but heal. After the astonishing events of that previous evening, Jesus takes himself away to pray early in the morning. Mark 1: 37 the disciples come to look for Jesus who has taken himself away to a solitary place to pray "Everyone is looking for you! Jesus replied – "Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." Then within one more verse we see him 'filled with compassion' healing a leper who goes and shouts about it and as a result "Jesus could no longer enter a town openly. But stayed in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere."

When God renews the disrupted and deranged world, driven by his compassion, it is not extraordinary that the sick should be healed. It is a matter of course. And in every healing we experience something of the resurrection. We feel newborn. As if life has been given back to us. The healings are a foretaste of the life to come. Like the parables of spring, of new life, it is a pointer to the hope of a new heaven and new earth. The messianic age that is now but not yet. We should expect the Kingdom to point us to look for healing of spirit, emotions, body and mind. We will not escape the cycle of life and death in this world, but the Kingdom shows God's heart, his intentions and our hope. We are not wrong to long to see and be agents of his healing in lives and land.

2. Parables

Jesus talks about the KoG in comparisons, or parables, which he takes from the world of nature & humans. These bring the KoG close to us in a way no definition could. Mark 4 has a group of parables drawn from nature: the parables of the sower and the seed and the parable of the mustard seed. These are pictures of beginnings, life-processes of hope. Nature itself becomes the parable.

In spring the trees become green, the flowers bud, and the seed springs up. In the same way the KoG is the final springtime of creation. New life begins, everything that has been created comes alive and becomes fruitful. The parables are taken from spring and summer, not from autumn and winter. Nature's cycle is growth & decay, becoming & dying. But it is only the becoming that is adopted as a parable for God's kingdom. Why? Because the KoG is the new creation of all things for eternal life. What strikes you in these parables is that we are not in control – 4:27 “Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.” From insignificant beginnings, the results are large – 4:20 “Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word and accept it, and produce a crop – 30, 60 or even 100 times what was sown.” 4:31 “It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air perch in its shade.” We cannot understand these new beginnings, we are not in control of them, and God will work to bring about his intentions through them which will be much greater than we could ever imagine. So the KoG is awakening, it is the reversal of death and atrophy, it is the seed of hope.

Luke 15 has another group of parables – the lost & found parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. The common theme? The joy of being found. Luke 15:7 “There is joy in heaven over one ‘sinner who repents’ more than over 99 righteous people. The shepherd leaves the 99 to find the 1. The father's joy is so great that he says “My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” The KoG is nothing other than God's joy at finding again the beings he created who have been lost. In the synopsis of Jesus' message in Mark “The KoG is at hand – repent”. But what does the word repent really mean according to these parables? It is nothing other than being found (the sheep wanders off, the coin can do nothing about its lostness), and the return from exile and estrangement, the coming alive again, and the joining in of God's joy. The son has no option left. He realises the desperate nature of his condition, it is the last resort to walk back home and expect nothing more than being taken in as a hired hand. The point of the story is that despite the deeply insulting way the son left, we see the Father's expectant waiting, his tears, running, joy and extravagant celebration. The kingdom brings reconciliation, and in that, the deepest joy possible to God.

We see the Kingdom in tiny seeds of hope. We experience something of the Kingdom when we have glimpses of the joy of seeing people being found again. We get glimpses of Eden.

3. Grace to the Outcast

The KoG is also revealed in the companionship of Jesus. He brought God's justice to people who knew no justice and to the unjust – to the ‘tax collectors and sinners’. “This man receives sinners and eats with them!” say the respectable. The self-respect of anyone who is shut out and rejected is profoundly injured. We feel ‘like dirt’. And if we accept this judgement and make it our own, we begin to despise and hate ourselves. But if in a situation of this kind we find people who accept and affirm us without any reservations, because they have hope for us, we feel strengthened and as if liberated. The acceptance of despised people is the social healing which Jesus brings ‘sinners and tax collectors’. In this way the KoG comes into the world of the humiliated and insulted, and breaks open the psychological prisons of self contempt.

4. The KoG belongs to the Poor

The constitution of the KoG in this world is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and that reaches its climax in the Beatitudes which call the poor ‘blessed’ because the KoG is theirs. The word used to describe the condition of beggars. One who crouches or cowers. Luke 6:20 “Blessed are you who are poor for yours **IS** the KoG”. When Jesus announced the start of his ministry in Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4 “The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”

Matt 11:5 When JtB wanted proof of the rumour that Jesus was ‘the one to come’ Jesus said tell him ” The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor”. This was to be a sign of the messianic mission.

The good news is preached to the poor and the poor in spirit – to the people in the world who are nothing and have nothing. The collective term ‘the poor’ embraces the hungry, the unemployed, the enslaved, the people who have lost heart and lost hope, and the suffering. What is the good news? What does the gospel bring to the poor? Not charitable works, although there are plenty of clear obligations on the rich to share their wealth w/the poor. Nor does the gospel make them just as rich as the rest. What it does do is give them a new dignity and a powerful stimulus. The poor are no longer the suffering objects of oppression and humiliation. They are their own determining subjects with the dignity of God’s first children.

Jesus brings the poor the certainty of their indestructible dignity in God’s eyes. They throw aside the values of global society which screams at them “You’re failures! You haven’t made it! You are human refuse.” They begin to live with their heads held high and an upright walk. Jesus does not set the poor on the road to social advancement, so that they can be as rich as the rest. He sets them on the road of inclusion, of fellowship, of dignity, whose culture is that of sharing.”

I saw this as the key difference between the Xian approach to the poor in India and the Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus. They are driven by obligation to give & administer, but the poor have their place in life. In the Indian caste system, the untouchables are born into their place. We met with the leaders of a work in one of the slums in Delhi that had been going on for 8 years. 750,000 people in a 2.5 km square. Helped set up SHGs, micro-finance, micro-enterprise, organise their own public services. As a result house churches were springing up and the next challenge is training the leaders. The local Hindu fundamentalists put together a petition but didn’t get a single signature. “Where were you when we were desperate?” In visiting the rural areas where a local Jesuit mission station was working to help the villagers with micro-finance and micro-enterprise we met a woman who had borrowed money to buy a cow. She stood tall, not cowering and scuttling like the others. She proudly displayed the cow and explained how much money she made from the milk, how long the loan would take to pay off, what her plans were for the future and how it had freed her from the crippling and pitifully paid field labouring and given her respect in the village.

Kagawa who pioneered a KoG ministry in the Tokyo slums “God dwells among the lowliest of men. He sits on the dust heap among the prison convicts. He stands with the juvenile delinquents. He is there with the beggars. He is among the sick, He stands with the unemployed. Therefore let him who would meet God visit the prison cell before going to the temple. Before he goes to church let him visit the hospital. Before he reads the Bible let him help the beggar.”

Why are the poor such a vital part of Jesus’ message? By proclaiming the good news to them, by saying the KoG was theirs he was not just liberating them. The point he was making was that they embody the brokenness of spirit that God has come to mend. Psalm 51: 16, 17 “ You do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart O God you will not despise.” Contrast this with the privileged access to the temple of Jesus’ day – if you had money you could buy offerings

to make, you could rent a pool for ritual cleansing. Or for us today the degree of self-reliance that we possess which means that we don't understand what it is to be desperate, destitute and incapable of doing anything about our predicament. Blessed are the poor. Theirs is the KoG.

So what does this mean for our understanding of our commission?

1. The Gospel is much broader in its effects & has much more to say than we usually think

When the KoG is lived and proclaimed by the Christ's church we should expect to see acts of compassion inseparably interwoven with proclamation of truth and struggles for liberation. The effects of the KoG will be seen in every sphere of our lives and society – in social justice, environmental stewardship, spiritual, economic and political liberation. The church should be at the leading edge in these fields fired by the vision of God's intention for his broken world and his heart for humanity. So often I feel the evangelical church particularly in the West has painted itself into this corner of a spiritual-only, conversion-centric gospel. With a few exceptions of course, this monochromatic portrayal of the gospel no longer cuts it in our post-modern, post-Christian west, and is hopelessly and depressingly inadequate in the 3rd world which labours under so much oppression.

What you so often pick up from the church is a single-dimensional view that God is only interested in saving people's souls. Sin and salvation is the only message. Pointing out what is sinful and prescribing anti-dotes becomes the only message. Where is our passionate concern for ecology, human rights, poverty, the effect of globalisation, 3rd world debt, ethical investment, the profound implications of some of the research being done in genetic engineering and so on? If we understand the kingdom properly, these are not merely special interest subjects. They should be core to what the church is seen to fight for. To passionately and compassionately articulate our understanding of the KoG in these areas is salt and light. We need the subjects to be much better understood and taught in the church. Perhaps then we will begin to see a church that gets passionate about making a difference locally and globally in ways that make people sit up and take notice. The mono-dimensional message is not scriptural, is no longer effective, and maybe never should have been. Of course the problem at the centre of all these issues is man's heart. A heart in desperate need of being found, of being reconciled with God, of being liberated from the bondage of sin. In explaining our beliefs and actions we need to move beyond an overly simple presentation of the gospel. We need to present a holistic vision of the Kingdom.

The gospel is the word which liberates the captives and justifies the sinners, which wipes away the tears and raises up men and women who are "cowering or bowed down". Its application is in every area that works against life – addiction, slavery, self-centredness, oppression, injustice. The gospel is the invitation to God's future - the springtime of the new creation.

The church's concern is not the church. It is more than that. The church has to do with God and his future for all men and women. It has to do with the new creation of all things for eternal life. Evangelisation is an invitation, nothing more or less. It is not instruction, not an attempt at conversion either. It is very simply a plea "Be reconciled with God. In Christ God has reconciled the world with himself, so be reconciled with God. Reconciliation is possible." Conviction of sin is the work of the Holy Spirit. He will do that most effectively when there is a vibrant church living out the KoG. "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard."

2. The Bible's vision of the KoG is intuitively right for humanity

What are we to make of secular humanists who also fight for very similar things to us? You only have to look at the huge proliferation of secular NGOs in the last decade to see that it is not just

Christians who are working for this vision. In the areas of action for poverty eradication (World Bank), social justice (Amnesty International), environmental responsibility (Green Peace), population control there are a large number of very passionately committed humanists who would strongly reject a traditional presentation of the gospel. These people are very often atheists with high morals and passionate commitments that frankly put the wider Christian church to shame. There are of course para church organisations committed to these things. Why is there so much that we will agree on if only we stay off the subject of religion? It is because the messianic vision of the New Creation, the resurrection order that Christ inaugurated is a compelling one. It is instinctively what humans long for – liberation, peace, fellowship, acceptance, well-being, and health. What we differ on is the source of our hope and salvation. Because the humanists know that they only have this life in which to make a difference they throw themselves into proving that humanity can take responsibility for itself and create a better future.

Here are the sort of facts that motivates them

- 1/6th of the 6 Bn people live on <\$1 per day and cannot satisfy the most basic human needs
- >8m die each year because of polluted water or air
- 6m die from malnutrition or starvation
- 2m die from diarrhoea or related diseases
- Aids has already killed 10s of million of Africans & projected to kill 25m more in the next decade
- Among the 4.5Bn inhabitants of developing countries
 - 3 in 5 lack access to basic infrastructure
 - 1/3rd have no drinkable water
 - ¼ live in substandard accommodation
 - 1/5th have no sanitary or medical services
- In Africa, the poorest region of the world, 174 of every 1000 children fail to reach the age of 5
- 1/5th of the world's children spend less than 5 years in school
- 1/5th of the world's children are undernourished.
- Worldwide, the top 20% of high income earners a/c for 86% of all private consumption
- The poorest 20% a/c for only 1.3%
- The richest 1/5th consume 16 times more meat, 17 times more energy than the poorest 1/5th
- Americans spend more on cosmetics and Europeans more on ice cream than it would cost to provide schooling and sanitation for the 2Bn people who go without both.
- The world's 3 richest individuals have more assets than the 600m who make up the worlds poorest nations.
- The top 358 billionaires are collectively richer than ½ of the world's population.
- If every person in the world had the lifestyle of the average American, we would at present population rates need 2.5 planet Earths to sustain us.

These facts insult and blaspheme the God of justice and righteousness that we say we worship. Christians fall into the trap of being so other-worldly that they ignore the warnings that their faith is not genuine if it makes no tangible difference to this world. A world that desperately needs to be shown God's love, forgiveness and hope.

Isaiah 58:6 warns of the dangers of over-spiritualising God's message:

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” What will be the effect of this? “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.” Then the church will be

effective. There can be no distinction between a spiritual gospel and a social gospel. There is only one gospel that is the hope for this world.

In an echo of this sentiment, Jesus is shown in Matthew 25 to give a stark and frightening warning to people who are tempted to believe that his message is only spiritual – the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25: 31-46).

“When the Son of Man comes, in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.” How’s that for an entrance to a story? So on what basis are people judged?

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or need clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’.

“Then he will say to those on his left ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

This is the some of the strongest language Jesus uses. The message is stark and pretty difficult to miss or explain away with some clever gymnastics. Jesus cannot be advocating salvation by works alone because his whole message is one of grace. He is simply expanding on his assertion that the Law and the prophets can be summed up in two statements: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind soul and strength. AND Love your neighbour as yourself”. What he is teaching is that the righteous do these things. The hallmark of a genuine faith is in tangible action to help our brothers and sisters in their need in a way that seems as natural to us as looking after ourselves. In the KoG, faith in Jesus and acts of Jesus are inseparable. Just as in Mark – his message and his compassionate acts could not be separated. They were part of a bigger whole that was the Kingdom that was near.

3. The hope we grasp by faith

We should not expect to see heaven established here on earth through our efforts to bring in the KoG. We do not know how history will play itself out. All we are called to do is be obedient and to live out the KoG in our lives and communities. Our hope is based on nothing more than the fact that the person who announced this Kingdom, who embodied it is not a figure of history with wise words and who lived a good example – he has actually physically embodied the new creation and is alive today. By his resurrection power we can take part in his plan for the redemption of a broken world. Because he is alive today and because we have experienced him in our lives, we are to testify to this experience, to live with him in us and in so doing, make a statement in the most powerful way that we can that the Kingdom is here. Reconciliation is possible. Redemption is being worked out.

I keep coming back to that promise of Jesus' in John 14 that he will do anything we ask if it is in his name. The context is Jesus explaining to the disciples, that everything that he said and did was showing the Father. They were the Father's words, his work. They had no need to be shown the Father. They had seen him in Jesus himself. But after this mind-blowing revelation, he goes on to say something even more unfathomable - that the Father wants to do the same with them through faith in the Son. In fact, he will do even greater things through them. So if our desire is to be a life that is used by the Father to continue his redemptive purposes on earth, we have Jesus' guarantee that God will intervene, sometimes miraculously, and grant our request.

John 14: 18 “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” We will understand more of Him as we obey him.

Very often those of us who are doers, instigators, entrepreneurs, achievers, spend our lives dogged by fear of failure and under achievement. It is what gets us up in the morning and what drives us to achieve our best. But in the Kingdom of God we are called to follow Christ. Our job is obedience. His job is success. The mustard seed is the smallest, but the tree that follows is the largest. We will probably never see the full fruits of our obedience, but to merely be part of God's redemptive plans for our world is something that should fill us with wonder, with joy and with praise.

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