

# **The Kingdom of Heaven is here**

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Matthew 9:35-10:20

During our senior year at Goshen College, Maria and I lived with friends in small-group housing. We had t-shirts made. I'm quite proud to have helped develop the slogan on the back. It says: "Wise as serpents, innocent as doves: one out of two ain't bad."

This instruction about serpentine wisdom and avian innocence comes in the middle of a discourse on the kingdom of God. (I need to add a disclaimer here: I don't like the word kingdom. It implies patriarchy and coercion. It implies borders and separation. I don't use the word in my hymns because the language of hymns has a way of sinking in and becoming formative. Unfortunately, though, I don't have a good alternative to use when I talk theology. So for now, I say "kingdom" and trust that you will hear it the way I intend it.)<sup>1</sup>

This part of Matthew is one of the strangest and most difficult "kingdom" passages to deal with. It lacks the sense of assurance of the beatitudes or the clear-cut instructions found in the sermon on the mount. Instead, here Jesus tells us what a pain it will be to work in the kingdom. What a way to motivate!

Part of the difficulty in understanding Jesus' description of our work is that for every imagination, there is a different conception of what the Kingdom of God is. Is it an earthly monarchy that we're supposed to set up and defend? Is it where we go when we die? Is it the institutional church? Is it a future hope that we can only dream of?

In seminary I read Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's *Spirit of the Liturgy*.<sup>2</sup> In it, Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, goes to great lengths to explain that God's kingdom is not a present reality, but is rather what will come at the end of time. According to this logic, our worship and our work is a temporary measure, designed to preserve the church until the initiation of the Kingdom. The sacraments, Benedict explains, offer us a taste of the coming kingdom. If you follow this reasoning along a natural and logical course, you will find that all areas of theology and ethics are impacted.

Take, for example, just war theory. Assume that we are not yet a part of God's kingdom, but rather anticipating it. We live in a messy world, and so we need ways of dealing with the mess. Biblical instruction gives us a framework for the coming kingdom, but since we are not in the kingdom yet, things like Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are unrealistic and impossible to put into practice here and now. Thus we have to design compromises that point us in the right direction, but allow us to preserve the church until the kingdom really comes.

Just war theory, then, is designed as a pragmatic way to minimize violence. It is not based in or supported by scripture, but if followed to the letter, it really would minimize the violence in the world. Of course it has been corrupted to a disgusting degree, to the point that it has been co-opted by numerous governments to justify decidedly un-just wars. President Bush claimed that the invasion of Iraq was just, even though it met none of the standards set out in just war theory.

I digress. The point is that assumptions about the kingdom impact theology and ethics, and all of life. Upon reading Benedict, I realized that my Anabaptist heritage carries a very different understanding of the kingdom. According to classic two-kingdom theology, the church, and specifically *my* church, the church that wears the right clothes and drives the right buggy and speaks the right version of German, is part of the kingdom of God. Everything else is outside of the kingdom of God, and therefore we must separate ourselves from it. Again, this has profound implications for theology and ethics. Clearly, we must have stringent requirements for living within the kingdom. These requirements take the bible literally, because this theology makes the same assumption about scripture that the “kingdom as future hope” system does — that scripture is designed as a guidebook for the kingdom. Hence this framework lends itself to heavy biblical literalism and temptation to legalism.

As for the rest of the world — that is a separate kingdom. We keep our distance from it, separating ourselves from it. Because it is outside of God’s kingdom, it operates by a different set of rules. The government is assumed to be ordained by God, but is an entirely separate institution from the church. As such, we can expect the government to do what it needs to do, even when we as a church could not participate. In terms of war, that means that while we won’t participate, we recognize the government’s prerogative to fight, and we may even be grateful for it. This rationale is how many conservative Mennonites and Amish justified support for Bush’s invasion of Iraq.

There are, of course, problems with that theology. It began to dissolve for many Anabaptists around World War II, when young Mennonites were conscripted into alternative service. Upon leaving their farms and closed communities, they discovered a world that they could not easily dichotomize. Categories of “in and out,” “good and evil” and “black and white” were not so easy to define. They discovered that we cannot be and are not separate from the world. If there are two kingdoms, they overlap so completely that we cannot make a clean distinction between them. The church benefits from the military and police defense of the state. Christians join the government. Members of the government claim to operate according to Christian principals. Strangely enough, Godly and good things happened outside of the Church.<sup>3</sup> And these Mennonites came to realize that the ethical conformity used to maintain the boundaries in their communities was its self a form of oppression — the very kind that Jesus calls us to dismantle.

If you've paid careful attention to all of my sermons, read over the transcripts, and done careful theological analysis (and if you haven't, I urge you to do so!) then you will find bits and pieces of my understanding of the kingdom of God in every one. I consider this to be absolutely crucial — a keystone of theology.

The passage from Matthew that we read this morning makes certain assumptions about the kingdom. First, when Jesus proclaims the good news of the kingdom, it is not about the future, and it is not about what happens after we die. The good news is for here and now — it is healing for the sick, comfort for

the “harassed and helpless” and inclusion for the outcast. When he sends his disciples out for the “harvest,” the harvest isn’t lost souls that need to be ushered into heaven, but suffering people who need to encounter the care of the kingdom.

Wherever the disciples go, they proclaim, “The kingdom of heaven has come near!” They act as emissaries of the kingdom: wherever they go, the kingdom goes with them. Some places are amenable to the message of the kingdom, while some are hostile. (I think it is very interesting that Jesus describes the *place* rather than the *people* as receptive or hostile.) And wherever the disciples go, they are to offer healing and peace.

Jesus also notes that the disciples will encounter opposition to their work. Not only governments but also religious authorities will be hostile to their message of restoration. It is a threat to the status quo.

All of this put together means that the two systems I described above cannot fully account for what the disciples experience. The kingdom of heaven is not just a future reality: it is somehow present now, and we are to take part in it. Neither is it an isolated phenomenon that requires separation from everything outside of it: it requires engagement and risk-taking. Our charge as followers of Christ is to work for the kingdom. We carry it with us, but we often also find it in places we least expect. God is often at work even before we are — we can join in.

Jesus’ description of the kingdom in this passage highlights our interconnectedness. If there is suffering, we are responsible to alleviate it. If there are outcasts, we are responsible to reconcile with them. If there are people in

need of healing, we are to heal them. If there are places in need of peace, we are to offer it. The kingdom of heaven is wherever these things are happening. Instead of the ethical thinking that arises from the “kingdom as future hope,” where Jesus’ teachings are seen as an unattainable description of a future reality, or “two kingdom theology,” where Jesus’ teachings become a strict rule-book used to maintain separateness, here Jesus’ teachings are signposts. They describe the actions of kingdom workers, and they offer ways to extend the kingdom. It is Jesus’ way of saying, “When you see this, when you see healing, care, comfort and reconciliation, guess what? That is the kingdom.” This is an invitation into a new kind of life. If there are boundaries to this kingdom, they are not ones that we build and maintain.

Obviously those things do not happen enough. Sometimes we don’t get the job done; sometimes, there is simply too much to do and we are overwhelmed. But the whole earth is bound for its own restoration. God is working now for what will be — a cosmos where the intrinsic harmony of all things is restored. I believe that we must not only offer reconciliation and healing to one another, but to creation as a whole. Protection and restoration of the environment is kingdom work.

Where do you see God at work? Where do you see glimpses of the New Creation? We don’t all have to be Christian Peacemaker Team members to live out this vision. In fact, among Mennonites we are uniquely situated to have a profound witness. If there was ever a city that needed an offering of peace, it is Washington — not only for the violence and degradation that it exports around

the world, but for the violence within its boundaries. If we are called to do God's work wherever we are, then we have plenty of work to do. We are called to love and serve the city, to bear its daily stress, and to cry for peace and justice.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This disclaimer drew several good suggestions during sermon response time. These suggestions generally addressed the patriarchal problem by suggesting alternative names like "kindom," "family of God," and "community." I agree that these are generally preferable to kingdom, but they still assume that whatever it is we are describing is a collective of people, and that necessarily there are people "inside" and people "outside" of the group. My point later in this sermon is that the group itself does not constitute the 'kingdom.' It is the *work of God* rather than simply the workers that makes up the kingdom. It is not the laborers, it is the harvest; not the construction workers, but the building; not the dancers, but the dance.

Let's test this with another love of mine – what if God is a choir director? We can be choir members, but the "kingdom of God" is the sound that the choir produces along with God. The sound fills a temporal and geographical space much larger than the individuals involved, and many other people hear it. They can appreciate the resonance, hum along, and even join in the singing. There are lovely sounds happening places where the choir isn't singing as well, because God is also a prolific composer. When choir members wander about and discover those songs, they can join in singing there, too.

This may well become a follow-up sermon. Stay tuned!

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, tr. John Saward, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press) 2000. See especially pp. 53-53ish.

<sup>3</sup> Maria astutely points out that many Mennonites worked in psychiatric wards as part of their alternative service. Seeing the rampant abuse and mismanagement that took place there, Mennonites became leading proponents of systemic reform, working through and with the government to establish more humane systems of care.

<sup>4</sup> This last sentence is drawn from "All who love and serve your city," hymn 417 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, written by Eric Routley in 1966.