

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD? 2

I said that today I wanted to look at the nature of the Kingdom as both a social and a personal reality. First, the social.

It can be fun to get hold of a map of the community around the church and to do some 'Kingdom spotting,' that is, to mark on the map any places where Kingdom-building is going on. These activities are ones where, as above, the common good, social justice and peace-making are in evidence. We should be able to identify organisations, charities, local authority provision, innovative schemes and entrepreneurial projects that exhibit the marks of the Kingdom. They won't all be Christian ventures, although there will be Christians involved in nearly all of them. We'll be able to see the inclusive scope of the Kingdom, the ways of God, the generosity of God, and the role of the local church in all that's going on in the community.

The social reality of the Kingdom of God

Jesus announced and inaugurated a new social order which was and still is a clear alternative to the way of violence, exclusion and self-centredness that prevails in so much of our world. *It's the reign of love, peace and justice, in the constant, near presence of God.* Jesus gave us glimpses of what such a reign looks like in the Sermon on the Mount and in his parables and teaching, but he didn't try to offer us a systematic account of the Statutes, Constitution and Memorandum of Association of the kingdom. He gave us snap-shots of the kind of thing it meant, the kind of way we would live, and the kind of way we would interact in the community of the kingdom.

One of the great things about God is his subtlety. God gives us glimpses and snap-shots to entice us. God isn't 'in your face' all the time with irrefutable instructions and demanding time-tables. In effect, God gives us a map of the territory of the kingdom, along with compass, walking boots and a packed lunch, and says, 'Go and explore'. And, as Abraham Kuyper memorably said, 'There isn't a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not say: This is mine.'

This comprehensive coverage of life is our mandate, as clergy and lay ministers, to help people in our congregations to work out what kingdom values mean when applied to the 168 hours of the week in which they are not in church. Teaching, home groups and conversations have to break out of captivity to church life and address the complex issues people face at work, at home, in friendship groups, personal finance, cultural pressure, addictive temptation and so on. Sermons need to tackle politics, science, sex, loneliness and the everyday struggles we all face. The church-bubble is a dangerously seductive place in which to linger but that won't hasten the coming of the kingdom.

Moreover, and crucially, we are called to be kingdom builders wherever we have influence. God's goal is a healed creation, a new world order in which the common good, social justice,

and peace-making are the hall-marks. How then can we nudge the organisations, institutions, families and systems in which we are involved, in the direction of the kingdom? This is the challenge we have to put to the people of God in season and out of season. How is what we're doing on Sunday impacting on what we're doing on Monday?

The personal reality of the kingdom of God

After looking at the social reality of the kingdom, let's look at the personal reality of adopting the kingdom as our reference point.

I love maps. I can spend hours devouring the contours, the place names, the distances, the high points. I delight in planning walks I'll probably never do, or revisiting sunlit days of my youth walking blue remembered hills. But looking at a map is nothing like walking over the terrain it represents. If I never get out into the countryside I've rather missed the point.

It's too arrogant to say that many church-goers have rather missed the point, because people come to church for wonderfully diverse reasons and it's not for us to quibble, but it's nevertheless true that in our churches in the West there's a lot of map-reading and not quite as much walking and climbing as we might like. We want to get on to the hills!

It's the difference between looking at a bottle of wine and sipping a glass of it, between studying a scorecard and being at the match, between watching the river and wading into it. Belden Lane writes, 'There are two doors in the next life – one is labelled 'heaven,' and the other 'lecture on heaven'. Everyone in the West is lined up outside the second door.' While this is an exaggeration, it's true that our early experiences of religion are only preparing us for the immense gift of being, in some way, burned by divine fire. We need holy tools to go deep with God. This may be where we could start talking about the Jesuit Examen, about *Lectio Divina*, centring prayer, practising the presence of God, Ignatian meditation, the Jesus Prayer, a structured Office, praying with nature, and more. But there isn't time for this, nor is it the place.

The point is that there's a difference between observation and experience in the Christian faith. It was summed up for me when a lovely, humble Christian woman was anointed by the river Jordan and said afterwards, 'Nothing happened, and everything changed.' That's what we work for in ministry, that people will find in their faith that nothing new happened (same place, same service, same people), but that everything changed and God's love is now delivered daily, freshly baked in the ovens of their own experience.

Can the church be an expression of the Kingdom?

Yes and no. Yes, as long as we know we'll never succeed in completing the task. As we know, the world is divided into different time zones so that new year in Australia happens half a day before it happens in the United Kingdom. In a related sense, the kingdom of God

belongs to 'new time', resurrection time, a new world. We still live in 'old time', a world still suffering from miserable compromises, but as Christians we have the incredible privilege of living in both time zones at once, with the task of trying to bring 'new time' values and priorities into our 'old time' society and culture. We live in the confidence that the kingdom of God has arrived and we are part of it now.

The church can be a (flawed) expression of the kingdom as we can try to be a laboratory of the future kingdom where we inevitably make lots of mistakes but nevertheless have occasional breakthroughs as we experiment with projects that belong to 'new time.' We can try and co-create experiences of beauty and truth through worship, art, music and other means that might attract people to the kingdom we so carefully and lovingly commend. We can challenge injustice both in the near community and in wider society as we increasingly see the world through the eyes of Christ. And we can pursue personal holiness, not as selfish ambition but as purposefully aligning ourselves with Christ. These are all proper kingdom projects for those of us in the Church. So the Church can be a partial expression of the kingdom (on a good day with a following wind).

We can believe in the Church as long as we believe *more* in the kingdom, and as long as we believe *most of all* in the King.