

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scripture: Various

"Kingdom Living (1): What is the Kingdom of God?"

WHAT DID JESUS TALK ABOUT THE MOST

What did Jesus talk about the most? Have you ever thought about that question? I remember years ago someone saying that Jesus talked the most about money. Even though Jesus said a lot about earthly riches, this was not His number one topic. I am sure some here would guess salvation. That would seem to be a good guess, but again not right either. I also know of folks who insist that Jesus speaks more about hell than heaven. Well, that is not right either because this reality not just includes but transcends even heaven itself.

Do you know what it is? I have to admit the sermon title gives it away. Jesus spoke the most about the Kingdom of God, also called the Kingdom of heaven. They are one and the same. The Kingdom of God is called the Kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel alone because Matthew was writing to Jewish believers, and in the Jewish tradition it was commonplace to refrain from directly referring to God in speaking for fear of breaking the third commandment - you shall not take the Lord's name in vain. Mark and Luke were writing to Gentile believers so they simply used the phrase, Kingdom of God. Which one did Jesus use? Probably both depending on the context.

But whether it be the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven, one thing is clear; it is this reality that Jesus taught the most about, because that is what life is all about - or what it is supposed to be all about - being in the Kingdom, being about the Kingdom, and reflecting the Kingdom of God. It is why the first thing we are told to pray for in the Lord's Prayer is ***"Thy Kingdom come."*** It is why Jesus said, after he told us not to worry about what we're going to wear or eat, ***"to seek FIRST the kingdom of God."*** (Mt. 6:33)

It is why we read in Gospels of Matthew and Mark that after He was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, Jesus then began His ministry empowered by the Holy Spirit with the words, ***"Repent for the Kingdom of God is near."*** And why Luke writes in Lk. 4:43, ***"But Jesus said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.'"***

In fact in all four Gospels, the phrase "Kingdom of heaven" or "Kingdom of God" is used over 100 times. And yet there is misunderstanding on what the Kingdom of God really means. Over the centuries there have been all sorts of interpretations about what is really meant by Kingdom of heaven or Kingdom of God. And usually the interpretations get fixated on a certain aspect of the Kingdom. So some folks say the Kingdom of God refers to what we are building in our midst. It is a just, classless society. Others say that it is simply a reference to Christ's presence on earth both in the past and His return. And still others contend that the Kingdom is really the one Jesus establishes at the end of the age when He comes in glory. Some even argue that the Kingdom of heaven and the Kingdom of God are different, the Kingdom of heaven referring to what God will do for the Jewish people and the Kingdom of God what God will do for Gentiles! Even though it is

clear in a reading from the Gospels that Kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are used interchangeably in the same parallel accounts. All of the above misses the reality. They are incomplete.

As is the case so often, man makes things more complicated than they really are. And when I say man, I mean even in the church. The message of the Kingdom is not meant to be complicated but it is meant to be all encompassing. In fact, when we understand what the Kingdom is and its significance, not only will it lead us to experience the Kingdom in the here and now – what I would like to call Kingdom Living, but it help share our faith with others. Because when we understand the nature of the kingdom and its purpose, it simplifies everything in life. It gets to the root of the problem and it gives us the solution.

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

So what is the Kingdom? To answer that question, we need to look at three aspects. First, what does the word mean? Kingdom literally means the King's domain or where the King rules and reigns. So if you are a member of a particular kingdom you are under that king's rule. Now you can rebel against that rule. You can disobey that authority but ultimately you will be brought under that authority sooner or later. Think about life today. As citizens of the United States we are under the authority of our federal, state and local governments. To the degree that we follow the laws of the land will be to the degree that we can excel and live life most effectively. Now certainly we can cut corners and we can even rebel against that authority and what will that mean? Our rights as citizens will be taken away or limited. We can't expect to have a truly free and blessed life, can we? We are still under the government's authority but we can choose to not live under this authority. It is the same way in the spiritual realm.

Now when Jesus said, ***"Repent for the Kingdom of God is near,"*** He was referencing Himself. That He is the king. How do we know this? Do you remember what Jesus said to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate? ***Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." 37Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."*** (Jn. 18:36-37).

WHERE THE KING RULES THE KINGDOM IS EXPERIENCED

So the Kingdom of God is not of this world – it does not originate from planet earth and it is not limited to planet earth. And ultimately, it is wherever Jesus rules. Now let me ask you, where does Jesus want to rule first? Is He concerned about land masses, political structures, or planets? No, none of the above. He wants to first rule our hearts. How do we know this? What does He say repeatedly, ***"Repent for the kingdom of God is near"*** What does repent mean? It means a change of direction, a change of heart. It is a turning from self and a turning to God. That is what repentance means. That is the only way we can be transformed. It is why Jesus said to Nicodemus in **John 3:3-8**, ***"Unless one is born again (born of water and Spirit), he or she cannot see or enter the kingdom of God."***

So if the kingdom is wherever Jesus rules, for human beings that rule first must begin in the heart of

man. And the more we bring our hearts, our desires and wills into conformity to Christ's authority the more we will experience His Kingly presence and power. There is a direct correlation to obedience and God's blessing. Remember what Jesus said after he said seek first the Kingdom of God – ***and all these things will be added unto you.*** In other words, you will have a blessed life. To seek the things of the Kingdom is to follow the King and His Law. It is to be under His rule from within.

Please turn with me to **John 15:7**: ***If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*** **8*****“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.*** **9*****“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.*** **10*****“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.*** **11*****“These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”***

Mt. 7:21, ***“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.”***

And then the Kingdom is to be experienced. Jesus said, ***“I came that you might have life and might have it abundantly.”***

Note what the Apostle Paul says, ***“for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”*** **Romans 14:7** What comes first before peace and joy? Righteousness. What is righteousness? Doing what is right! We cannot be righteous in and of ourselves but God makes us righteous by His grace and empowers us to then live righteously.

It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the kingdom is experienced. For Paul adds in **1 Cor. 4:20**, ***“For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.”***

Do you remember what Jesus said to John the Baptist when John was imprisoned and heard the works of Christ and sent word by his disciples who asked Jesus,

Mt. 11:3-6: ***Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” 4Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6“And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”***

Thus, the Kingdom is the peace and power of God that comes from walking with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And God's kingdom blessing is in the here and now as well as in the age to come. Look now at **Luke 18:28-30**. ***Peter said, “Behold, we have left our own homes and followed You.” 29And He said to them, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, 30who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life.”***

So the Kingdom of God is something we follow and it is something we experience. But it is also something we look forward to. For while we can experience the Kingdom by seeing personal transformation through walking with Christ in the power of His Holy Spirit and see God supernaturally intervene in everyday life, the fullness of the Kingdom will not be realized until the Return of the King. For although the world is ultimately under the authority of Christ, the world is also free to rebel. And this rebellion always begins first with division, then is followed by discord, which will give way to despair, and finally death. Moreover, we see the fruit of this rebellion in nature itself – in the planet, the animal and plant kingdoms, and in the human body with sickness and disease. We are under a curse. And though we can be set free from the spiritual parameters of the curse by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, we cannot remove ourselves from the physical parameters. In short, we are all going to suffer at one point or another and we will all die.

But thankfully, that is not our lot forever. We read in **Revelation 21:3-7** that after the coming of Christ, John writes, *3And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."*

5And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." 6Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. 7" He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son."

Jesus summed it up when referencing Himself, He said that at the end of the age, *"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'"* (Mt. 25:34)

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FOLLOWERS OF THE KING

So everything we do in life should be measured and seen in light of the Kingdom – that means in light of the King – Jesus Christ, in light of His rule and in light of His purpose. There is truly only one King of Heaven and Earth. His name is Jesus Christ. The Father rules through Him and Christ's presence is manifested to us through the Holy Spirit. There is absolute unity and fidelity among the Godhead of the three in One! Likewise, there must be unity among all believers in following the One True God. His Kingdom has no end, it is eternal, it reflects the characteristics of the King, and it is meant to be experienced. It is transformational and it is meant to not only be lived out, but to be preached. Hence, Christ's words, *"**This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.**"* (Mt. 24:14)

So how do our lives match up with God's Kingdom? Is Christ ruling in our hearts? Is His Word and Law in the forefront of everything we do? Are we experiencing His presence and power? If not we need to go back to the previous question and see where we are missing the mark. Moreover, are we investing in God's Kingdom priorities of proclaiming His gospel of the Kingdom working within the Church as the Church and engaging those outside the church as well?

Everyone and everything must be seen in light of God's Kingdom. Everything else is withering and passing away. It is only the Kingdom that will remain and it is only the Kingdom that can bring fulfillment and purpose because it is only the Kingdom of God that truly reflects the rule and reign of its King – God, the Father, God the Son and God, the Holy Spirit. AMEN!