

THE "REAL" JESUS BELIEVED IN...
LUKE 4:42-43; 17:20-21
(FIFTH SERMON IN SERIES)

MARCH 16, 1986

Jesus believed in the kingdom of God. This is the fifth sermon in the series to discover the "real" Jesus who is obscured by centuries of theology and culture. We have seen that his heart ached with pain over the coming destruction of the nation by the Romans. He identified with the poor people, warned the establishment about the consequences of its behavior, and preached that the kingdom of God was near. But, they ignored Jesus and made themselves vulnerable to the unprecedented catastrophe of their nation's destruction.

Jesus believed in the kingdom of God. This belief has had a confused history in the church. Even in your lifetime, you have probably heard contradictory statements about the kingdom of God. The primary questions are: What is the kingdom of God? Where is the kingdom of God? How and when will the kingdom of God come to this earth?

I think that most Christians agree that the kingdom of God means the rule or the reign of God. The kingdom of God is where and when God is in charge, where Satan is conquered and where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom of God, then, is where there is no pain, no illness, no war, no death, no tears, where God is praised, where people are fed, where people are treated justly.

The remaining questions, however--where is the kingdom of God and how and when will it come to this earth?--find varying answers. As with most beliefs, there is a wide spectrum within Christianity. At one end, the prevalent belief of mainline, liberal denominations in the 20th century is that the kingdom of God is already here on this earth, expanding like yeast in a baking loaf of bread. Liberals generally believe that the kingdom of God is an evolutionary development, that human life is gradually improving. Liberals believe that the kingdom of God is found within the inner life of every person, a divine spark of goodness. The task of the church, therefore, is to elicit or draw out the good that is in everyone and build the kingdom of God, as stated in the words of a hymn, "With deeds of love and mercy, thy heavenly kingdom comes." The horror and holocaust of World War II caused many people to become quite disillusioned with the naive notions that "everything is gradually getting better and better," and that the kingdom of God might somehow be built by human effort.

At the other end of the spectrum are the fundamentalist, conservative Christians who generally believe that the coming of the kingdom of God is a future event. Jesus, at his second coming, will rescue the believers from this earth in the "rapture." Then will follow the Battle of Armageddon when the armies of God will defeat the armies of Satan. This earth will then become the kingdom of God, a new heaven and a new earth. The task of the church, therefore, is to save souls for the future kingdom so that they will be able to enter the kingdom of God when it comes. The sad result of this belief is a lack of concern for human life, a resignation to the present ills by saying, "Wait until Jesus comes."

What did Jesus believe about the kingdom of God? Let's first look at what the people of Jesus' day understood about time. We in our culture tend to view time as linear. Time is a straight line with us: yesterday, today and then tomorrow. We tend to understand time as quantitative. Biblical culture viewed time as qualitative. Remember how the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote, (3:1-2, 4)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
what is planted;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

Albert Nolan in Jesus Before Christianity writes (pg. 74)

For the Hebrew, to know the time was not a matter of knowing the date, it was a matter of knowing what kind of time it might be. Was it a time for tears or a time for laughter, a time for war or a time for peace? To misjudge the time in which one lived might prove to be disastrous. To continue to mourn and fast during a time of blessing would be like sowing during harvest time. Time was the quality or mood of events.

We also tend to know what behavior is appropriate to the time. We know that a memorial service is not the time for levity. We know that worship is not a time for popcorn, and that a wedding is not the time to point out the groom's mistakes! Sometimes there is tension when there is not agreement on what the times mean. Today, many say, is a time to emphasize peacemaking. Others say that this is a time to prepare for war, or at least a time to increase and upgrade our military weapons.

In Jesus' day also, there was disagreement over the interpretation of time. The Pharisees said it was the time to negotiate and coexist with Rome. The Zealots said it was the time to revolt against Rome. John the Baptist saw the catastrophe coming and read the signs of the times as God's judgment and punishment. John said this is a time for mourning, weeping, fasting and abstinence.

Jesus, however, saw the same catastrophe coming and read the signs of the times as an opportunity for the salvation of God, the kingdom of God, to come. Jesus saw signs of hope. Jesus felt it was time for the kingdom of God and said to his followers, "This is a time for rejoicing, celebrating, feasting. Happy are you, blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven." The "when" of the kingdom is not a matter of linear time, but a quality of time; that is, when the time is right.

A closely related question is: where is the kingdom of God? Liberal Christians answer: the kingdom of God is within you. There is only one statement of Jesus' that can be interpreted this way, and it is a mistranslation. It was read in our gospel lesson this morning, Luke 17:20-21. The King James Version reads, "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." The phrase "within you" is open to misunderstanding. The clearer Revised Standard

Version, which is in the pew Bibles and from which we read the lessons, reads, "Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." Some translations read, "among you" or "in your midst." The phrase "within you" does not mean "within an individual person," but rather "within the community or group."

What Jesus is saying is that the kingdom is not within a person, but a person can be within the kingdom of God. Don't look to see if the kingdom of God is in you. Look to see if you are in the kingdom! For Jesus, the kingdom of God is something into which people enter; it has a door or a gate upon which you may knock. It also has keys and can be unlocked. People sit down in the kingdom and eat and drink in the kingdom. The kingdom of God, to Jesus, is a political structure that is ruled and governed by a king, namely, God. The kingdom of God is not in you, but you can be in the kingdom.

On the other hand, conservative Christians agree that the kingdom is a political structure, but that it has not yet come to this earth. The coming of the kingdom is a future event, enacted by God, not by human effort. Jesus would agree that the kingdom of God is God's doing and not human effort, but Jesus did not relegate the kingdom completely into the future. Yes, Jesus did speak of the kingdom as a future event, but it is a future event whose time has come. It is a future event that impacts the present, and, indeed, is already breaking through into the present.

Jesus answered the question--where is the kingdom of God?--by saying it is near. "The kingdom of God is at hand," he said. "The kingdom of God is near." Jesus was not much interested in saving persons for a future kingdom; he was not only about the business of saving souls so they could go to heaven when they die, or when he comes again. Jesus, as I have emphasized previously, was oriented and committed to the present. He was terribly concerned about the impending catastrophe. He was compassionate about the ills, sorrows, and hardships of the poor. Jesus called people to join him and enter the kingdom of God. He called people to change their thinking, values, perceptions and prejudices.

Furthermore, Jesus understood that Satan rules the world, that evil rules the kingdom of this earth, but that God is in the process of defeating Satan and gives signs that this victory is not only assured in the future, but is already in process. Sometimes we get lulled into thinking that God is responsible for accidents, massacres, cancer, AIDS, child beatings. One of Satan's most effective strategies is to hypnotize good Christian folk into believing that Satan does not exist!

Where is the kingdom of God? Rather than thinking of the present earth and the kingdom of God as consecutive events, think of them as simultaneous kingdoms. The kingdom of God is all around us and, in God's time, breaks into our present existence. Jesus pleaded with the people to look at the signs. The kingdom is near. The deaf are hearing, sight is being restored to the blind, God is at work. Redemption is nigh. The kingdom of God is near. You who have eyes to see, look! You who have ears to hear, listen!

Can't you hear Jesus pleading with us? Look all around you. God is at work. Sometimes God has had to raise up other movements than the church because the church was complacent. But the kingdom of God breaks through in spite of resistance. God called an alcoholic named Bill to minister to alcoholics through Alcoholics Anonymous because the church was too righteous

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to associate with "those drunks." We told them, "You shouldn't have drunk in the first place." God used the black church to launch the civil rights movement so that all people might be treated with dignity and be given equal opportunity. God has raised up a peace movement to rid this earth of nuclear weapons. God raised up missionaries like Lillian Wallace to educate Indian girls, to treat Indian women with dignity and undermine the rigid caste systems of degradation. Look all around you for signs of the kingdom. This is the time for the kingdom. The kingdom is near.

Enter the kingdom. Put yourself where God is working. Usually this calls for a radical reorientation. The best translation today for what Jesus meant by "repent" is "reorient." When God breaks through into your life, when the vision of what this world could be like breaks through, when you seek to follow Jesus and identify with the poor, the hurt, and the suffering, you are compelled to change old prejudices, old loyalties, old methods, old political positions. Your values change, your outlook changes.

Jesus believed in the kingdom of God. He called the people of his day and he calls us today. The kingdom of God is near. Repent! Radically change your orientation! Follow me. In Jesus day, very few responded. How about you?