

Entering the Kingdom of God: What Does This Mean?

By Dr. Jeff Mirus | May 22, 2014

The Kingdom of God is a fairly difficult concept to pin down. The phrase does not occur in the Old Testament, but we find it directly referenced some sixty times in the books of the New Testament, with even more references in slightly different terms. Five of the NT writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Paul teach us about the Kingdom of God. If we are to understand the concept, we must turn to them.

Of the five, only Paul uses the term “kingdom of God” to designate a clearly discernible kingdom imposed by force. But Paul is speaking eschatologically and even apocalyptically. In other words, he is describing the Kingdom of God as it will be in the end times, “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (*cf.* 2 Thes1:3-10).

It is important to note this eschatological connection, but apart from identifying Jesus Christ as the king, this provides little for us to use here and now. One clue: Paul refers to the suffering of the Thessalonians for their “steadfastness in faith” as a process of being “made worthy of the kingdom of God.” The kingdom will be revealed clearly only when “he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed.” Paul’s letters are a good start because they are among the earliest of the New Testament texts.

Paul also makes it clear in his letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians that it is necessary to do God’s will to enter the kingdom of God: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” The immoral, idolaters, adulterers, sexual perverts, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers, those guilty of envy, “and the like” are all excluded (*cf.* 1 Cor 6:9-10 and Gal 5:21). But Paul makes clear that this is not only a matter of avoiding certain fleshly evils; it is a matter of living in the spirit of God: “I tell you this, brethren: Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor 15:50).

Matthew and Mark

With this background, it is easier to understand Matthew’s four brief passages mentioning the kingdom of God. He quotes Our Lord as saying, “if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). So here the coming of the Kingdom is clearly associated with the Spirit of God. In Matthew’s gospel, Our Lord also explains that detaching oneself from the things of this world (Mt 19:24), doing the will of the Father (Mt 21:31), and bearing good fruit (Mt 21:43) are necessary to enter the Kingdom of God.

Mark uses the phrase “kingdom of God” eleven times. From his gospel we learn that the gospel itself is intimately connected with the kingdom: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). We also get

some impression of the kingdom's unparalleled yet mysterious fruitfulness. It is "as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how" (Mt 4:26-7), and it is like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a great shrub in which birds can nest (Mt 4:30-31).

We learn again that it is necessary to avoid sin to enter the kingdom—no, not just to avoid sin but actually to relinquish our attachment to it ("if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out" (Mk 9:47ff). And we learn that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mk 10:14-15). This suggests a simple trust in the Father.

But Mark adds two important twists. First, there are some currently living who will not die before they see that "the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mk 9:1). Second, Our Lord will not drink wine again "until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mk 14:25). This led some to expect the rapid establishment of a coercive kingdom on earth (*cf.*, Lk 19:11), but we have already seen that St. Paul describes the coercive kingdom only eschatologically. So this coming "in power" must refer to something deeper and more subtle. Indeed, we begin to suspect that it is tied somehow to Our Lord's death. "I say to you, I shall not drink again...until that day"—these words were spoken on the eve of His Passion.

Luke: The Master of the Kingdom

Luke mentions the kingdom of God 29 times in his gospel and 5 more times in Acts. He emphasizes that Our Lord spoke of the Kingdom always and everywhere. We learn from Luke that the poor are blessed because the kingdom of God is theirs (presumably because of their detachment from the world) (Lk 6:20), and that we must be prompt and wholehearted in response to the invitation to the kingdom (read, for example, Lk 9:60-62).

Moreover, the kingdom of God has the power of leaven, which makes the whole loaf rise (Lk 13:21). Finally, it is of incomparable value, for "no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God," will fail to gain much more in return (Lk 18:29). We recall here the pearl of great price, which we could have learned about from St. Matthew (13:45-46) if we had extended the scope of the search to include not only "kingdom of God" but "kingdom of Heaven".

Perhaps more importantly, we learn from Luke that the Jews who reject Christ (who, after all, comes from the Father) risk exclusion from the kingdom. They will weep and gnash their teeth while people enter "from the east and west, and from the north and south", to join "Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets...in the kingdom of God" (Lk 13:28-9). This ties the kingdom very closely to the acceptance of Christ himself. And we also realize, now for certain, that the kingdom is not an obvious kingdom in this world: "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk 17:20:21).

Clearly now, we are dealing with a spiritual reality, a transformation of the whole person in Christ. And in Acts, Luke recounts that the very mission of the disciples was to preach this transformation in Christ, including sacramental entry into the Church, as the process of gaining the kingdom of God. Acts 8:12 captures it very well: "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." (See also Acts 14:22, 19:8, 28:23, and 28:31.)

St. John references the kingdom of God in just one passage. Interestingly, his contribution is to strengthen the fundamental tie between the sacraments and the spiritual regeneration which constitutes entry into the kingdom. He recalls the conversation between Our Lord and Nicodemus:

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." [Jn 3:3-5]

The conclusion is perhaps inescapable. Rebirth in the Holy Spirit is the key to entering the Kingdom of God. It follows that living in the Holy Spirit is the key to remaining in His Kingdom. It should now be self-evident that we are talking about a fundamental transformation of the whole person. By the power of the Spirit, Christ increases in us; and so we can and must learn to see as God sees, judge as God judges, love as God loves. Put simply, entering the Kingdom of God means receiving the Holy Spirit, whom Christ promised to send after His passion, death, Resurrection and return to the Father.

No wonder He told His disciples that His departure was best for them: Through the Spirit, every disciple of Jesus Christ can share in God's own life, the life He imparts to us by grace. Now, what difference does this make? What difference ought it to make?

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