

Thy Kingdom Come

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What on earth is the Kingdom of God? For lots of people, it's the fairy tale realm, where brainwashed believers go to spend all eternity living inside the luxury of a shampoo commercial, where everything is clean and pure and happy, and – who knows – you might even have a harp! The final resting place of the tediously well-behaved.

For some, the coming Kingdom – means the second coming of Jesus. When God finally draws the space-time continuum to its great and utter climax. The four horsemen of the apocalypse have done their worst, the planet has almost blown itself to smithereens, then with a drumroll and a trumpet, Jesus unzips the sky and floats down to earth like a Monte-Python cartoon – to judge the living and the dead.

For some, a kingdom, means a land. Like the United Kingdom – which is neither united nor a kingdom. But – in English – kingdom only took this meaning in the Elizabethan era, thanks to writers like Shakespeare. But many people today, on hearing the word kingdom, think of a realm, a place, a land, a geographical expanse.

If you were a Palestinian peasant, living under Roman Rule, watching the land taxed from under your feet, your ancestral homelands being taken from you by powerful outsiders, and many of your fellow citizens being deliberately kept just above the poverty line – you might take a different view from all of the above.

When Palestinian peasants hear a controversial prophet pitch up and declare that the Kingdom of God is at hand – what would they think?

Originally, kingdom did not refer to a geographical expanse. It referred not to the realm of a king, but to the rule of a king. Whenever you hear the word kingdom in the bible, it is perhaps better to think of the word Kingship. What kind of rule does this king bring?

Jesus himself gives an answer. Traditionally called, the Nazareth Manifesto – Jesus stands up in the debating chamber, and declares he has been anointed – just like kings are anointed. And, if Jesus is bringing God's kingship into effect, what does it look like? It looks political through and through. It is a reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah – our first reading.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for blind. To set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour...

That last phrase, the year of the Lord's favour – in all likelihood, refers to the Jubilee – the era of debt cancellation – in a world where debt was everywhere, and the powerful folk who create those debts, expected them to be honoured. But when

Jesus reads from that scroll, he finishes mid-sentence. He does not complete the reading from Isaiah, that says, the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God.

For many people, then and now, divine vengeance is what you want. If you feel threatened, aggrieved, oppressed – it's the most natural thing in the world to want violent vindication over oppressors. And Jesus omits it. I suspect, that's why the crowd in synagogue get violent with him – and basically try to execute him. And for me, in what is probably the most understated miracle of the New Testament, having been seized by an angry mob – he just walks right through them.

But there it is – Jesus, having declared that the Kingdom of God is breaking into people's present experience – gives a pretty clear manifesto. And it does not employ any violent overthrow.

Throughout the gospels, this passage for me, provides the lens through which all of Jesus's words and actions are to be interpreted: words and actions designed to bring freedom for the poorest and most oppressed people, without bringing violence to the hated overlords.

The trouble is, that sounds like an impossible dream – how can you help the plight of an oppressed people without destroying the oppressors? Well – that is precisely what the rest of Luke's Gospel is about. And as you read on, you see that even John the Baptist was confused that Jesus wasn't inflicting retribution on the oppressor. And John sends messengers to Jesus, basically saying, "What the hell? Where's all the fire and the brimstone?" You're supposed to be our liberator. Are you the one we're expecting, or is someone else going to come along and do all the judgy violent stuff?

And Jesus doesn't say, "Yes – I am the one you're expecting." Instead, he tells the messengers to go back to John and report what they see. And what do they see? They see Jesus doing everything he promised to do in his manifesto – and more. And there is no violent overthrow.

Justice without violence, fairness without retribution – that is what you're asking for when you pray *Thy Kingdom Come*. The manifesto is there.

Now, given that it's remembrance day – it is worth pausing here. Justice without violence. Is it always possible. 91 year old politician and diplomat, George Mitchel, on the Rest is Politics podcast this week – was asked whether peace in the Middle East is possible. And he said, "Men start wars – and men can stop them."

But – if I were to ask, “Would you be willing to kill someone for Jesus” – you’d look at me like I was a mad person.

But – if I were to ask, “Would you be willing to kill someone for your country?” – why does that sound a lot more plausible?

And this is why many of us feel utterly disturbed by the subtle shift in the language of remembrance services, away from “We must never allow this kind of mass slaughter to happen again,” to “Honouring the sacrifice they made.” The language of sacrifice has already given the game away.

No. When we pray, Thy Kingdom come, whatever else we are asking for, we are seeking the precise political priorities outlined by Jesus – in which the thermometer on the health of the society, are the plight of the poorest and weakest and most oppressed.

Does that sound idealistic and utopian? Well – our current status quo is already fundamentally, and idealistic utopia – the assumption that we can continue to extract infinite growth from a finite planet, is utterly and blissfully utopian. But most of us can remain ignorant of the consequences here and now.

And the status quo utopia will no doubt reign until the only thing that’s left to mine are the pockets of the poorest people – who then go and do things like vote for the wrong candidate! Infinite growth for some, resource depletion for others, it’s the recipe for war.

By praying Thy Kingdom come, we are seeking radical change, just governance here and now.

And by praying Thy Kingdom come, we are not seeking a blissful afterlife, or a land grab, or the defence of our soil – we are seeking just rule.

And by praying Thy Kingdom come, we are offering ourselves to be a means by which a fair world is created here and now, under our noses.

REMEMBRANCE DAY II

Lord God of hosts, we worship you as the God in whose name countless armies have marched and endless battles are fought. And in our world of growing violence and unrest, we pray for peace.

We lament that each new generation must learn the art of peace for itself, only after it has suffered the ravages of war. And we want to remember well.

We lament the deaths of those who have fought in wars, at the end of which we see so little lasting peace. And we want to remember them.

We lament the victims of war who no one misses: for those whose lives are only known to us as statistics. And we want to remember them.

We lament that so often, the only lessons we learn from war – are how to disguise our own nation's violence, how to fight wars by proxy, how to hide casualty lists and civilian deaths, how to silence the voice of the victim.

We lament the power that defence industries can hold over governments.

We lament that war is so often declared long before it becomes a final option.

We lament that those who work to prevent war are rarely celebrated as heroes.

As we remember those who have given their lives in war, those who have lost their lives in war, and those whose lives have been forever damaged by war, we cry for peace – and ask that by your grace, you will make us agents of peace.