

## Can We Still Say Kingdom?

John 18: 33-37

What was it Jesus talked about more often than any other subject? What was the most common theme in his parables? In the language of the New Testament, it was the kingdom of God. So much of the biblical concept of Jesus' teaching is couched in the archaic language of his own culture – especially this idea of the Kingdom of God. I wonder today, can we still say “Kingdom” and express the reality Jesus represented and articulated?

This image of kingdom carries baggage. It represents the normal mode of human governance for thousands of years and, in some ways, even today. Structurally, power is concentrated at the top. A large group of peasants supports the monarchy financially. There is an affluent class and that affluence is not democratically shared. Tribal boundaries and allegiances are displaced by tax districts and top down economics. Social policy tends to be oppressive rather than liberating. There is an elaborate bureaucracy that continued to increase in size. This central government is inherently conservative, designed to preserve itself. Therefore, it is immune to questions of justice & compassion (Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*). A standing military serves at the discretion of the king rather than the people.

Kingdom religion is static and serves to integrate people and validate the king's power. God is always accessible to those in power. God's freedom is compromised – limited by the priorities of the state. The state promotes wisdom in manageable pieces to reinforce acceptable behavior. There are no mysteries to be honored, only problems to be solved. God's only business is to maintain our standard of living and stay in God's place, in his palace – the temple. (Brueggeman)

Now the alternative kingdom – what the New Testament calls the Kingdom of God -- is quite different. The politics is of shared power -- not power over but power with. The economics is of equality, shared wealth, and equal opportunity from the bottom up rather than the top down. The religion is marked by a God who is absolutely free: not always accessible, but never controlled (Brueggeman). One theologian describes this kingdom as a partnership society. Our task in such a society is to “witness to the freedom of human life from the power of death, the threat of death, and the fear of death.” (William Stringfellow, lecture in KirkrIDGE, PA, Jan. 12, 1985)

You and I cannot bring God's reign, God's kingdom, into being. We cannot save this world. That's God's work, but God apparently will not do it without our help and our cooperation. We can trust that God's will is for all lives to be characterized by the love of God, the love of neighbor, and the love of self. “We do not know how much of God's will can be realized in human affairs. We must act as if the world can be transformed without guarantees that it can be or objective evidence that we are succeeding. We can only know by trying.” (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 320)

To be clear, this is not an effort to create a utopian scenario, a “gradually improving society progressing toward perfection.” More likely, there will be increased violence, war, and inhumanity.” (Wink, 320) That would be a natural reaction of the powers of darkness as our commitment to the Kingdom of God, our trust in this vision, grows stronger. This is where we live, in the midst of a broken world, by faith in the reality of Jesus' alternative kingdom with a new consciousness of divine reality.

As we see God in the face of Jesus, we are invited to see God in the face of each person and also in the mirror. This idea of being in partnership with God calls for responsibility on our part.

God has made a radical commitment to human free will in such a partnership. God is making a rather large gamble on humanity. The bottom line is that only God can redeem people and systems, and God apparently does so only with our help.

The last stanza of one of the enduring hymns in Christian history begins, "What language can we borrow to thank thee, dearest friend?" (*O Sacred Head Now Wounded*, anonymous Latin)

One of the challenges we face today is find the contemporary language to describe what the New Testament called the Kingdom of God. Is there an image you find meaningful or compelling, that conveys the impact of the reality that is at the core of Jesus' teaching?

Jesus' teaching, as preserved by the early church, gives us an opportunity to see, perceive, and touch the reality of God in the manageable form of a human life. Using the image of water, it's as though God is majestic, glorious, and as breathtaking as Niagara Falls. It is amazing to see, but overpowering. It is not the place to try to get a drink. Jesus, though, is like a water fountain: the same substance, but in a form that can nourish us and satisfy our thirst. And what is more, Jesus taught us that we too are fountains with divine water welling up from within our lives.

In answer to the question posed in the title of this sermon, yes we can still use kingdom language. The New Testament described what is at the heart of faith by using the image of a kingdom. Yet it was really more of an anti-kingdom -- not a domination system, not hierarchical, not patriarchal, not coercive, and not static. I find some other images helpful for today.

The *Life of God* describes the organic sense of that reality, simply that our lives exist as part of the life and being of God -- literally in God. We live sharing the life of God, breathing God.

*Eternity* describes the mystical and non-linear nature of the reality that is essentially spiritual, that calls us, in this life, to remember who we are as spiritual beings seeking to be God conscious -- awake to the deep reality of our lives.

Finally, there is the image that we are in a *partnership with God* on a journey of growing and shaping our lives, creating this world in sync with God's Spirit. This is an image of us as co-creators of God's dream and what can become our dream.

What are the implications of seeking and using new language for the heart of our faith? Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you a king?" (John 18: 33) But Jesus told him, "my kingdom is not of this world." (John 18: 36) This was not a statement of location, but of kind and quality: a kingdom not like the kingdoms of this world. Someone in Pilate's position, with his power, would not recognize Jesus' truth as a kingdom. The New Testament proclaims, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ." (Revelation 11: 15) It is not a matter of putting Jesus on Caesar's throne, but of totally transforming our understanding of what is real -- how we can live together.

Yes, of course we can still say kingdom, but we need to remember what the biblical writers meant by it. Their meaning was just the opposite of what most people meant by *kingdom* in those days. It was an alternative to traditional kingdom language.

Since we don't tend to live in kingdoms today, it seems to be important that we find some other, additional, language to describe God in our lives and our lives in God. And there are implications for what we believe and how we live. As we understand God not as some other being out there, living separately from us, but of God and us and all life in terms of oneness,

then we face a challenge to realize our power to be who and what we want to be. Our challenge becomes to want what is the best for us. It is to wake up to the God presence in our lives, to be the God presence in the world, and to be co-creators of what this world can be. And it is never to give up trusting that God is working in us and with us to bring this reality to pass. Jesus invites us to see the world by faith as God sees it, invites us to choose to live in the world according to this vision.

Finally, then, how shall we move forward? What does it mean to live in the in reality of eternity, of the life of God in us and around us in partnership with the Spirit. We need to trust that God's new creation is also our new creation. We need to trust that it's coming into being against all evidence to the contrary -- that the values of this new creation first things last and last things first. We need to lead with what is our true abundance: justice, compassion, love, peace, cooperation, and humanity as first priorities. Power, money, and efficiency as become complementary or secondary values.

Yet in all this, in living this way, we will not bring the kingdom, the reign, reality of the life of God. We will only be touching part of the reality that is already present, already in us. In living this way, we will be committing ourselves to this reality. We will be learning to live more awake to it, trusting that God is God and that there is a reality beyond our awareness. It is a reality in which we see face of God in the faces that are all around us. It is a reality in which we find affluence by letting go the sense of our need for wealth, power, acceptance, and affirmation as a means of validating our existence and measuring ur success.

We are accepted and therefore we accept each one with open arms. We are loved and therefore we love each one with open arms. We are challenged and therefore we challenge each one to live in the world with open arms in Jesus' name.