

THE KINGDOM OF GOD:

Introduction - Readings: Mark 1:14, Acts 1:1-3

(Emphasis on Jesus' ministry 'sandwiched' with the Kingdom of God)

Exercise: So what do we understand by the Kingdom of God/Heaven (Matthew)? What comes to mind? (Is often considered within wider study of ESCHATOLOGY (end times/last things – might be deceptive!))

Mentioned over 100 times in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) - (but in John's gospel only twice – emphasises more 'eternal life' – an interesting comparison).

Kingdom 'understanding':

Broadly speaking, the Greek word (*basileia*) means 'kingdom' in four senses:

- 'realm' = territory;
- 'realm' = people over whom a king rules;
- 'reign' or 'rule' = the act of exercising kingship;
- 'reign' or 'rule' = the state of affairs which results from royal action.

When Jesus teaches the disciples to pray 'Your kingdom come', it is not a prayer for a geographical locale to come in which God will rule, nor for a people who will be under God's rule, but for the exercise of God's sovereign kingship and power; that his royal will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Spoken of in three ways:

1. Futurist

The coming of the kingdom of God lies in the future and will intervene in human history

2. Realised

The kingdom of God has already arrived and been realised in the ministry of Jesus

Inaugurated

The kingdom of God has begun within history, although it will only be fully realised in the future

Exercise: (5 mins – briefly discuss where you are at 'now' – we will compare this and re-assess at the end of the study.

Brief OT Background:

The term 'the kingdom of God' does not occur in the Old Testament, although it is used frequently in the New Testament. The emphasis in the Old Testament is that God is King – not only of Israel, but of the whole world (e.g. 2Kings 19:15; Ps. 29:10; 93:1-2; Dan. 2:44, Psalm 24:1, great assumptions of man's accountability – Jonah 1, 1 Sam 15:1-3)

While believing, therefore, that there was a sense in which God was already king of the world, Jews were looking forward to a time when his perfect kingship would be fully manifest. Such hopes are expressed in, for example, Isaiah 24:21-23 (cf. also 52:7-10; Daniel 2:44; Zechariah 14:9-20).

Intertestamental:

In the earlier part of the period the idea of the kingdom of God was that it would be set up on earth. Other groups within Judaism emphasised the transcendental aspects of the kingdom (1 Enoch 37-51). Gradually the idea grew that the kingdom would be set up on a transformed earth, and then later, a transformed heaven.

Church Fathers:

"And so if the manifestation of the Lord's kingdom is the concern of the will of God and of our earnest expectation, how is it that some pray for some extension of this present age when the kingdom of God, for whose coming we pray, means the conclusion of this age? We desire the hastening of our reign, not the protraction of our slavery" (**Tertullian**, *On Prayer*)

Augustine asserted the primacy of the heavenly city as the focus of Christian life in the present and Christian hope for the future. Over against the earthly city, he saw the heavenly city of God, represented by the Church. The earthly city is the city of Cain and ultimately of the devil, and the Church has to engage with it and criticise it.

19th Century: The spiritual kingdom of God:

The general view about the kingdom of God during this period was that it was not an external rule, but a reign of God within the hearts of men and women. It would grow as it spread to others in the world, thus eventually Christianising' society.

The kingdom of God would not arrive through an end-time cataclysmic event, but would be introduced and spread progressively by men and women throughout the world.

Q? What do you think of this 'ethical' Kingdom teaching?

Against this:

According to **Weiss and Schweitzer**, Jesus was not primarily a preacher of morals, but one who proclaimed the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. Weiss argued that Jesus' view of the kingdom was thoroughly eschatological (future) in its orientation. Far from being an ethical rule in peoples' hearts, the kingdom of God would arrive in a cataclysmic manner in the future.

The British scholar, **C.H. Dodd**, argued that the doctrine of the kingdom of God should not be orientated towards the future, but as something which had been realised and which was present in the life and preaching of Jesus.

Exercise:

Q? What are the potential dangers in each emphasis of a future or now kingdom? Is taking a 'middle ground' sitting on the fence?

Future, Realised, Inaugurated:

The three positions are distinguished by their concept of the **time frame** that they propose for the kingdom:

Future: (but imminent!): (Future Exercise):

Jesus, they argued, used the phrase 'the kingdom of God' as his contemporaries did – that is, to speak of the imminent entry of God into this world, to destroy evil and bring about the new creation. Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. Jesus (according to Weiss) was saying that his contemporaries were very close to the fateful day of the Lord.

Scholars cite **three pieces of evidence** to show that Jesus expected the imminent apocalyptic kingdom.

1. There was a likelihood that Jesus would use his language in the same way as his contemporaries did – and that meant as apocalypticists (end time prophets) did.

2. Jesus was associated with John the Baptist who appears to have presented himself as an end-time prophet preparing the way of the Lord (note his use of Isaiah 40:3), that is, preaching radical repentance before the coming of God in judgment. John's message has a clear eschatological ring (see e.g. Luke 3:7-9, 16-17).

3. In addition to Mark 1:15, there were key sayings about the kingdom of God which suggested Jesus thought of it as a future catastrophic intervention of God, and one that was imminent.

The Beatitudes: Matt 5:1-10:

These beatitudes are primarily futuristic in expression: the mourners shall be comforted, the meek shall inherit the earth, the hungry shall be satisfied, the merciful shall receive mercy, the pure in heart shall see God. They point to a future act of God which will reverse the conditions of oppressed humanity.

The disciples' prayer: Luke 11:1-4:

Within this prayer we have the request of Luke 11:4, 'Father, Let your name be hallowed. **Let Your kingdom come!**' (and Matthew has 'Let your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven'). This is an urgent plea, it would seem, for God to fulfil his promises by establishing his universal reign in creation, and to do so soon.

Eating and drinking in the kingdom of God (e.g. Matt. 8:11; Mark 14:25).

Both these texts are rooted in the Jewish expectation of a celebratory victory feast when God establishes his rule – see (Isaiah 25:6-10).

Jesus' Language & Actions:

Jesus announces 'the kingdom of God is at hand', he would be taken to mean: 'God has drawn close in kingly power; he is coming, indeed he is standing at the door; judgment and salvation are upon you.'

Revelation 21:1-5 – a major future emphasis – a 'discarding' of the old order.

Thus explains why:

1. It explained the connection Jesus made between his miracles and the coming of God's reign. If God was already beginning to throw back the powers of evil in healing and exorcism, that was a sign that his kingdom (the total destruction of evil, and redemption of Israel) was very close. Hence, for example, the command 'Whenever you enter a town... heal the sick in it, and say to them, "The Kingdom of God has come near you"' (Luke 10:9, 11).

2. The imminence of the expected kingdom also explained (to some scholars) the radical nature of Jesus' ethics. It was not an ethic to be lived out when the kingdom of God arrived, for then there will be no temptation to avoid by cutting off the offending limb, nor evil men and women to strike us to whom we might then turn the other cheek. The Sermon on the Mount was only intended to provoke a final short spurt of intense ethical effort before the kingdom of God broke about the ears of men and women!

3. It was also thought the theory could explain why Jesus did not appear publicly to proclaim his Messiahship. The Messianic age only dawns with the coming of God's kingdom. Until then Jesus could not be the Messiah; he could only be the Messiah designate.

Realised: ("now" Kingdom): (Realised 'now' exercise):

"That Jesus spoke of God's kingdom as fully come in his own ministry".

The central emphasis of Jesus' ministry was not that the kingdom would soon appear, but that it had already fully arrived in his own ministry and teaching. That is, Jesus believed his ministry to be the ultimate manifestation of God as king of righteousness and salvation.

Look up the following verses – how might they emphasise the 'now' Kingdom of Jesus?

Luke 10:23-24, Matthew 13:16-17, Mark 2:18-22, Luke 17:20-21, Luke 16:16, Matthew 12:28, Luke 11:20:

Mark 2:18-22

When it is asked why the disciples do not fast, Jesus replies that fasting is not appropriate when the bridegroom is there. This was applying typical eschatological imagery (the end pictured as a marriage celebration between God and Israel) to his own ministry.

In Jesus' day, these Isaianic passages were certainly understood as a prophecy about God's coming reign; the day he would release the captives. Isaiah 61 itself drew on the imagery of the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25: 8-55) which envisaged a restoration of land and release of all slaves. Though Luke 7:18-23 does not quote Isaiah 61 in the way that Luke 4 does it still forms the background when Jesus uses the same list of signs as proof that the kingdom has arrived.

Luke 17:20-21

Any saying from Jesus that focuses on the timing of the kingdom has to be especially significant. Yet we must note that the final two Greek words of this controversial saying - 'for behold, the kingdom of God is entos humon' - have a significant impact on the interpretation of this saying.

Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20

Jesus' exorcisms cannot be dismissed as a mere sign that the kingdom of God is near. They are a piece of the kingdom itself; for where Satan is driven back, the rule of God begins. We are reminded of the passage from Isaiah 61.

The Parables:

Many of the parables of the kingdom of God assume its presence:

Read the following parables and identify elements of them that might argue in favour of the "now" Kingdom:

- ❖ Matthew 13:44-46
- ❖ Luke 14:15-24

In the context of Jesus' ministry as a whole, and of the Pharisee's opening remark, in particular, the point of the parable is clear. Jesus claims that what the Pharisee says he is waiting for - the kingdom of God - is there, ready to be enjoyed. He has called them to partake, but the Pharisees are rejecting Jesus' offer of the blessings of God's reign; so they are being enjoyed by the outcasts and sinners instead.

Citizenship:

Whilst our focus has been on the gospels – Paul (briefly – as this would be another study!) – can refer to God’s people as ‘citizens’ (in the present tense) of God’s household (Ephesians 2:19).

How much emphasis should we (and in reality do we) put on our heavenly citizenship (under a Kingly rule) now?

Inaugurated: (The ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ Kingdom): (Exercise):

Jesus announced a future, total, cosmic rule of God in salvation and blessing, just as the apocalyptists expected, but he also taught that this same, future, glorious rule of God had already started to break in on the world wherever men and women responded to his good news. This position, which maintains that God’s end-time rule and salvation has already begun to penetrate the world of men and women, in and through Jesus’ ministry, is called ‘inaugurated eschatology’.

Exercise:

Find Mark 10:15 (and/or its synoptic parallels, Matthew 18:3, Luke 18:17) - This verse has been used as an example of a saying that incorporates both ideas of a kingdom present and one to come. Focus on the final part of Jesus’ words and try to identify how that might be the case.

Jesus mentions an entrance into the kingdom that is clearly a future event. But in order to achieve that future entrance, there must be a present embrace of it.

Similarly – how do the following parables embrace both a ‘now’ and future Kingdom?: Matthew 13:24-30 (Jesus explains in 36-43), 31-32, 33.

Q? How might confusing the coming of a ‘physical’ or ‘geographical’ Kingdom only restrict our ‘Kingdom’ vision?

Remembering that the ‘kingdom’ refers to **the saving rule of God** as much as (or more often than) it refers to a realm, we see Jesus encouraging the acceptance of God’s rule **now** as the prerequisite for experiencing the coming kingdom (in all aspects of presence and rule). GE Ladd states, ‘the beatitudes expound both the eschatological salvation and the present blessedness’.

Citizenship – A 'Now' & 'Future' Hope:

The Apostle Paul reminds the Philippian church of their true citizenship – but also tinges his encouragement with a 'future' hope - how? (Phil 3:20).

The phrase 'the kingdom of God' denotes God's end-time reign of salvation and righteousness, or the state of affairs which gives rise to it. This cosmic saving rule of God was begun in the ministry of Jesus, was strengthened through Jesus' death, resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit, and will finally be consummated in the end of the world and the re-creation of the universe.

The whole mission of Jesus, including His words, deeds, death and resurrection, constituted an initial defeat of Satanic power that makes the final outcome and triumph of God's Kingdom certain' (GE Ladd – A Theology of the New Testament).

Kingdom of God Study Exercises:

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5 mins – briefly discuss where you are at ‘now’ – we will compare this and re-assess at the end of the study.

Q? What are the potential dangers in each emphasis of a future or now kingdom? Is taking a ‘middle ground’ sitting on the fence?

Future Kingdom Exercise:

How might the following verses emphasise the ‘future’ aspect of the Kingdom of God?

Luke 3: 7-9, 16-17, Mark 1: 15

In what sense are the Beatitudes ‘futuristic’ in their emphasis? (Matt 5: 1-10)

When Jesus taught the disciples to pray – how might this have had a futuristic emphasis? (Luke 11: 1-4)

How might passages like Revelation 21: 1-5 cause a general disregarding of any current ‘Kingdom’ teaching – focussing purely on the ‘future hope’?

Realised ('now') Kingdom Exercise:

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Future, realised (now) or inaugurated (now but not yet) – where do you stand on this now? What are the key issues for you?