

The 'Kingdom of God' in the Parables of Christ

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Introduction

Distant memories of school assembly held in a decrepit gymnasium hooked me into this article. A battered out of tune piano accompanied our daily hymn while prefects kept young pupils in line with a hard slap from a hymnbook across the back of the head. When I recited '... thy Kingdom come, thy will be done...' (Matt. 6:10) it meant nothing. In fact I doubt if anyone at assembly, including our bearish headmaster, had much interest in what the 'Kingdom' alluded to.

While the parables are at the heart of Jesus' teaching, this exploration of what He meant by the phrase 'Kingdom of God' maintains that the theme of *Kingdom* is woven through the whole of Jesus' ministry. 'We can therefore understand it only in the light of that preaching as a whole.'¹

I will first contextualise Jesus' ministry within the framework of Israel's plight. Although Jesus doesn't mention 'Kingdom' in the parable of the Sower I am going to refer to it since Snodgrass believes it is 'the parable about the parables,'² and Wright argues that it speaks of the Kingdom. I will also explore the parables of The Mustard Seed, The Leaven and include the Lords Prayer.

Messianic Expectation

At the time of Jesus' birth in 6 – 4 BC Rome was Israel's overlord. 'The great promises of forgiveness articulated by the prophets of the exile³... had not yet been fulfilled.'⁴ Jewish expectation (Isa. 16:1-5; Jer. 23:1-8; 30: 21; Psalms 72:1-20) was that God would one day send a Messiah to fulfil his covenant. 'It is in Daniel [7]...

¹ Ratzinger, J. (2007). Jesus of Nazareth. London: Bloomsbury, 62.

² Snodgrass, K. (2008). Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 145.

³ Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

⁴ Wright, N.T. and Borg, M. (1999). The Meaning of Jesus. New York: Harper Collins, 32.

that we find the strongest statement of what the climax will be... the arrival of God's own Kingdom... trumping the rule of all pagan powers.'⁵

The Gospels and Jesus' Perception of the Kingdom

Wright argues that the Gospels are an antidote to Rome's first century's narrative of its history reaching a climax in Emperor Augustus 'the "son of God", and his Empire. [The Gospel writers seek to awaken the readers' imagination by suggesting], that ultimate power looks like [Jesus' ministry], not like that of... Augustus.'⁶ However, I believe the primary motivation of the Gospels is to relay the story of Jesus as the final chapter in Israel's story, with the Kingdom of God arriving at that point.

In the light of Israel's history and hope, Jesus announced his ministry in terms of freedom and justice (Matt. 5:6), stating that He fulfils Isaiah's prophecy (61:1-2) of releasing captives, restoring sight to the blind ...' (Luke 4:18-19). It was an '... imminent implementation of a new regime whose marks would be that the rich would give to the poor, the captives would be freed, and that the hearers would have a new mentality, if they believed this news.'⁷ The message was clear; 'the Kingdom was ... breaking into history, *but... it did not look like what they had expected.*'⁸ Frequently Jesus told his contemporaries that God was present in the experience of listening to Him. Essentially there was contact 'between a person and the Kingdom at the moment of that person's committed response.'⁹

Rejection and the Kingdom

Rejection of God is embodied in Israel's story (Ezekiel 2:3-5) and is a constant theme in Jesus' ministry (Matt. 5:11-12, John 5:36-40). Jesus warned that the prevailing religious / legalistic rigidity was detrimental to advancing the Kingdom 'and

⁵ Wright, N. T. (2012). *Imagining the Kingdom: Mission and Theology in Early Christianity*. The Scottish Journal of Theology, 65 (4), 385.

⁶ Wright, N. T. *Imagining the Kingdom*, 379.

⁷ Yoder, J. H. (1994). *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 32.

⁸ Wright, N.T. and Borg, M. *The Meaning of Jesus*, 35.

⁹ Chilton, Bruce. (1996) *Pure Kingdom: Jesus' Vision of God*. Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 79.

would result in national disaster.¹⁰ The Jewish authorities didn't understand God's heart for the lost. 'Instead of recognizing Jesus as God's agent of salvation,'¹¹ He was a threat to their position. Judaism's focus was on the collective and ritual purification / worship, whereas the foundation of Jesus' teaching was the individual 'whose infinite value He recognized... [Where] The individual's moral action, his works of love, will decide whether he enters the Kingdom...'¹² or is excluded.

The Sower (Mark 4:3-8, 13-20; Matt 13:3-8, 18:23, Luke 8:5-8, 11:15):

Biblically speaking, seeds, planting, thorns, weeds, failure of crops, seasons and bountiful harvest¹³ are frequent 'metaphors describing life with its hardship and its prosperity, instruction, and the judgment and blessing of God.'¹⁴ The parable of the Sower follows this path. The sower's indiscriminate scattering of the seed often seems to be ineffective 'illustrated by... the pathway, the rocky ground, and the thorns... [However when a few seeds fall on good ground] there will be an abundant harvest in due course.'¹⁵

Interpretations are plentiful: Encouragement despite failures, explaining Israel's rejection of Jesus, God sowing the true Israel in her own land, the seed as God's effective word (Isa. 55:10-13) and more. Wright states the parable reflects that 'YHWH himself was returning to his people, to sow his word in their midst, as he promised, and so to restore their fortunes at last.... [It] tells the story of the Kingdom.'¹⁶

The Kingdom of God is not a worldly kingdom; it is like a seed planted in man's inner being. In the right conditions, which we can choose to move towards, the seed will grow and radiate outward. 'There is life in the world of conventional wisdom, and

¹⁰ Wright, N.T. and Borg, M. *The Meaning of Jesus*, 35.

¹¹ Strauss, M. (2007). *Four Portraits, One Jesus*. Michigan: Zondervan, 181.

¹² Ratzinger, J. *Jesus of Nazareth*, 51.

¹³ OT Canonical sources: Isa: 6:1-13; 30:8-26; 55:10-11; Jer. 4:3-4; 5:21; 23:8; 31:27-28; Ezek 12:2; 36:9; Hos. 2:22-23.

¹⁴ Snodgrass, K. *Stories with Intent*, 155.

¹⁵ Hultgren, A. (2000). *The Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 188.

¹⁶ Wright, N.T. (1996). *Jesus and The Victory of God*. London: SPCK, 238.

there is life under the lordship of God. The latter is the path of liberation and entry into a new way of being.¹⁷

How people hear and respond to God's message in Isaiah (6) is reflected in Jesus' proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom,¹⁸ with the focus on the individual's responsibility to hear, understand and respond. The 'parable is also a warning for hearers not to fail as Israel failed with Isaiah... [Jesus' call] cannot be satisfied with casual or temporary attention; rather, it is all-encompassing and will not share the stage with wealth and mundane cares about life.'¹⁹ We should also consider the seeds that took root on good ground, but subsequently became choked by weeds and succumbed to the temptation of creating worldly kingdoms using God's name. What looks so good is ultimately worthless like the 'whitewash' of the false prophets (Ezekiel 13:10-12). Sadly because of the hypocrisy and abuses many desperate people turn away from the salvation and goodness of the true Kingdom.

Jeremiah summarised the human condition; 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?' (17.9). Despite over two thousand five hundred years of history²⁰, knowledge and social improvements, our greed and attachment to power is, at the very least, as great and bloody. However 'the person transformed by Jesus' teaching seeks to do the will of God (Matt. 15:18-19).'²¹ The Kingdom is the counterbalance or Jeremiah's cure. I believe the daily conscious practice of seeking it is a vital step in resolving the tension / enmity between satisfying our own desires (often borne out of emotional / psychological wounding) and living a life that is honest, loving, healing and not detrimental to others. One does not necessarily exclude the other, but the desire or motivation determines the outcome. 'At the heart of the way of Jesus is a radical recentering... [a] path of liberation and entry into a new way of being.'²²

What strikes me is that there is so much seed the sower does not ration it; God's word and grace for even the most wretched is not limited. Everyone has the

¹⁷ Wright, N.T. and Borg, M. The Meaning of Jesus, 74-75.

¹⁸ Snodgrass, K. Stories with Intent, 155-156.

¹⁹ Snodgrass, K. Stories with Intent, 176.

²⁰ Jeremiah 650BCE – 570BCE - <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jeremiah-Hebrew-prophet>. Accessed 17 February 2016.

²¹ Hultgren, A. The Parables of Jesus, 195.

²² Wright, N.T. and Borg, M. The Meaning of Jesus, 74-75.

opportunity to enter the Kingdom and the person who 'hears... and *understands*... bears fruit...' (Matt 13:23). Wright says that getting the point of the parable is akin to making 'a judgement on oneself.'²³ 'The result is that the teaching of Jesus becomes a matter of the heart (Matt. 13:19).

The Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19):

God '... keeps for us the appointed weeks of the harvest' (Jer. 5:24); which is a symbol of the arrival of the Kingdom. The contrast between a few seeds leading to an abundant harvest in The Sower (Matt 13:8) is mirrored in the parable of the Mustard Seed where small beginnings lead to large outcomes.

Hultgren suggests that the parable was a reply to the question; 'How could the ministry of Jesus ... have anything to do with the Kingdom? [We should remember Jesus showed no intention of a dramatic overthrowing of Israel's overlords]. The response to that charge is that one should look to the [tiny] mustard seed.'²⁴ Despite its size, a great plant grows from it.

The tiny seed that Jesus refers to is the *brassica nigra*²⁵ that grows in Galilee and is still used to produce pungent seasoning oil. The fact that Jesus chooses this seed as a metaphor for the Kingdom is striking. Apart from its size it has other attributes that could be considered secondary Kingdom characteristics; (A) once established, in the right conditions, the plant seeds itself and multiplies. An example of this 'seeding' can be seen in personal testimony; when the Samaritan woman was restored by Jesus' mercy she could not stop spreading the good news (John 4:3-42). (B) Mustard oil permanently changes the taste of food. A person who hears and understands Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom has their life infused with a powerful flavour that cannot be ignored.

²³ Wright, N. Jesus and The Victory of God, 181.

²⁴ Hultgren, A. The Parables of Jesus, 396 -397.

²⁵ Black mustard.

The parable of the Mustard Seed is regarded as the promise found in Isaiah; 'For the earth will be full of knowledge of the Lord... (11:9)²⁶ and The Leaven is also seen as having a similar Kingdom message.

The Leaven (Matt. 13.33; Luke 13.20-21) and The Lords Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13):

The Matthean community thought of 'themselves as living between the ministry of Jesus on earth and his parousia, a time when the Kingdom "is becoming", coming into being...²⁷ Through His ministry Jesus proclaims 'The Kingdom... has come near (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9).²⁸ The verb "come near" (*engizal*²⁹) is used in the perfect tense... 'referring to that which is so near that its approach has been completed, although it is not yet completely present. [It is the moment of] arriving and arrival itself.'³⁰

The parable of The Leaven reflects the "come near" nature God's Kingdom; the fermentation process of leaven is '...decisively important for what becomes of the dough,³¹ – it expands. The moment leaven is introduced it, in effect, has arrived and yet the impact is not readily visible. The 'Kingdoms inauguration within Israel'³² is like the leaven quietly working its way through the dough. God '...is working in a way which is hidden and opaque, but which, nevertheless Israel ought to recognize.'³³ We could say that with leaven the dough has the possibility of fulfilling its potential or become what it was designed for. These are Kingdom messages. With leaven, the flour becomes whole as we are made whole in Christ.

When Jesus taught his followers to pray that God's Kingdom would '...come on earth as in heaven', 'he was right in the middle of first-century Jewish theocratic aspirations.'³⁴ The plea to "come" [is] from *erchomai* in Greek, 'ata' in Aramaic ...

²⁶ Pink, A. W. (2005). The Prophetic Parables of Matthew Thirteen. Bellingham, WA: Exported from Logos Bible Software, December 2015, Page 6.

²⁷ Hultgren, A. The Parables of Jesus, 399.

²⁸ NIV.

²⁹ Greek.

³⁰ Chilton, Bruce. Pure Kingdom, 61.

³¹ Ratzinger, J. Jesus of Nazareth, 58

³² Wright, N.T. Jesus and The Victory of God, 241.

³³ Wright, N.T. Jesus and The Victory of God, 240.

³⁴ Wright, N. T. Imagining the Kingdom, 383.

[and] is not usually associated with the Kingdom in Judaic literature... [It] is more natural to speak of when the Kingdom is to be “revealed...”³⁵ ‘in a way YHWH wants it (as opposed to the way Israel wants it).’³⁶ I believe the symbolism of Leaven highlights this particular partition to God.

Conclusion

Woven through the parables is a call to respond to the Kingdom. Jesus ‘...invites us not to study but to join; not to dissect but to enter.’³⁷ With an invitation rejection is possible, but God won’t coerce us. However, when we don’t enter the Kingdom we risk ‘violence [erupting] in some form or other, whether in physical or mental illness in the individual, or civil unrest within a nation...’³⁸ Rome wasn’t a particular concern for Jesus’, however the evil one was. I believe that particular voice has found strength in the current global crisis.

Scriptural affirmations of God’s Kingdom come, inaugurated by Jesus, and ‘[pivoting] on justice, peace and joy,’³⁹ are often challenging in the face of overwhelming injustices and suffering. For some it calls ‘into question the very existence of God.... [And] others refuse to trust... in [a] God who allows history and life to proceed as it has.’⁴⁰ We may ask; why does nothing seem to be happening? Do we need to do more? However, a linear approach to the Kingdom is problematic.

Jesus doesn’t give a ‘clear, prosaic description of the Kingdom or of the moment or the method of its coming.’⁴¹ It is visible in Jesus’ ministry – He cast out demons in its name, but in His sayings leaven is the Kingdom’s image as much as he is.⁴² The Kingdom is here now and yet to come, within us and outside us. It is complex and ‘only by accepting it in its entirety can we gain access to, and let ourselves be guided

³⁵ Chilton, Bruce. *Pure Kingdom*, 60.

³⁶ Wright, N.T. *Jesus and The Victory of God*, 293-294.

³⁷ Kraybill, D. (2011). *The Upside Down Kingdom*. Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 32.

³⁸ Hughes, Gerald. (2013). *God of Surprises*. London: Darton Longman and Todd, 9.

³⁹ Kraybill, D. *The Upside Down Kingdom*, 193.

⁴⁰ Keller, T. (2008). *The Reason For God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism*. London: Hodder, 22.

⁴¹ Chilton, Bruce. *Pure Kingdom*, 99.

⁴² Chilton, Bruce. *Pure Kingdom*, 99.

by His message.⁴³ The faith found in Mark (4:26-29) encourages patience (Romans 5) just as; '...The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth' (James 5:7-8).

I believe the journey of psychological / emotional healing shares ground with a spiritual journey. A psychoanalytic writer encapsulated my experience (to date) of God's Kingdom. He says when a truth is seen or experienced a profound change occurs in the individual who can never be the same again... 'It is in the very nature of truth that each glimpse only emphasizes the degree to which truth still lies outside or beyond. This means that the individual is always in relation to truth and in a state of *potenta*... a state of *movement towards*.'⁴⁴ Perhaps when I stood in the gymnasium and recited the Lord's Prayer that was my Mustard Seed; Too small to see and for many years on shallow soil and often choked by weeds. Looking back I can identify God 's presence in my life spreading like The Leaven. God's 'Kingdom come' has changed my heart.

⁴³ Ratzinger, J. Jesus of Nazareth, 59.

⁴⁴ Symington, N. (1986). The Analytic Experience: Lectures from the Tavistock. London: Free Association Books, 17.

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