

Easter People: Living in the Now and Not Yet Sunday, 5/15/22

Last week we wrestled with the difficulty of believing without seeing. Easter People embrace faith that shows them the reality they hope for and the evidence of things they can't see. That means that even though we didn't see the empty tomb for ourselves, we still find hope in the grace and freedom the resurrection affords us, both in this life and the next. Today, we'll try to understand the paradox of the Kingdom of God. Has it already come, is it yet to come, and why does that matter anyway?

So has the Kingdom of God already come, or it is still to come? The answer is "yes." Don't you hate it when that happens? If Jesus tended to be a little mysterious about the subject, maybe it's because the Kingdom of God is a little mysterious! There seem to be so many things about God's perspective and plans that elude our limited ability to understand. But fear not. It's quite possible for Easter People to live within the revelation given us and still find joy in the journey. Before we tackle the "now and not yet" nature of the Kingdom, let's remind ourselves of what the Kingdom is.

How can we begin to understand what Jesus meant by the "kingdom of Heaven," the term Matthew seemed to prefer, or the "kingdom of God," when so many of the people whom Jesus walked the earth with got confused by this phrase? Do you remember poor Nicodemus from the Gospel of John, the Pharisee who couldn't quite get his mind around the kingdom of God because of the spiritual prerequisite for entering the kingdom: that is, "being born from above" or "born again?"¹ Being born again means dying to our allegiance to ourselves and rising to a new life that is wholly dedicated to the life and work of Jesus. Allegiance is an essential feature of any kingdom: Kingdoms are not democracies but monarchies with monarchs who insist on allegiance to their rule. That's one of the reasons we still refer to God as "Lord," even though the term is so firmly rooted in our political past.

Entering God's Kingdom is not a matter of crossing the moat, dodging arrows, and busting through the portcullis into the castle keep. Instead, entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven happens through baptism by the Holy Spirit and the life of discipleship and growing in grace that follows when we keep our side of the bargain in the baptismal covenant. We

¹ John 3:1-21

gain entrance to the Kingdom by being born again and living a born-again life. But what does this kingdom look like?

Most of what Jesus had to say in the Gospel of Matthew revolves around his description of the Kingdom. Here's my attempt to summarize all of that in a single image. Is this picture as disturbing to look at for you as it is for me? Maybe I'm just prone to vertigo, but there's something about the sky and the mountain tops appearing at the bottom of the picture that makes me want to grab hold of something so I don't fall to my death!

Let's face it, just like this picture, the upside-down kingdom of Jesus can be difficult to look at too long, because it begins to challenge and unravel our carefully constructed worldviews that keep us comfortable and secure in our lives. The weak and humble are exalted, the last become first, the poor become rich, and we find life in dying. The Kingdom of God can look so different from the Kingdoms of the world that it can be disorienting if we don't familiarize ourselves with God's perspective on a regular basis.

Like all Kingdoms, the Kingdom of God has boundaries. Jesus instituted new ones, like baptism, and abolished old ones, like a rigid dependence on Old Testament law and the exclusion of outsiders. If you're interested in belonging to the Kingdom of God, you'll have to be ready to adjust to these new boundaries, lest you find yourself straying outside of the Kingdom. Are you ready to give absolute allegiance to Jesus, as your Lord and King, abiding by God's holy standards of love, justice, mercy, and peace? That's what the Kingdom looks like, and what it means to belong to it.

In what sense, then, has the Kingdom of God already come? In our first reading from Luke 17, Jesus said quite clearly, "the Kingdom of God is already among you."² And yet, almost in the same breath, he said that the return of the Son of Man, that is, the second coming of Jesus, is yet come. This suggests to me that the birth and life of Jesus initiated the coming of the Kingdom, and the very presence of Jesus was itself a sign of the Kingdom among the people he interacted with through his teachings and miracles.

The Kingdom started with his incarnation and began to grow as he travelled, teaching and demonstrating about the Kingdom. The Kingdom is not here yet fully, because Jesus

² Luke 17:21. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

makes very clear that he'll be returning to tie up all the loose ends, something Jesus amplifies further with a parable in chapter 19, with Luke commenting, "[H]e told them a story to correct the impression that the Kingdom of God would begin right away."³ Besides, it doesn't take a very keen observer to see that the poor are still oppressed, the strangers are still excluded and taken advantage of, and the arrogant are still in power. Surely the Kingdom is still coming.

Which brings us to our next reading in the Gospel of Matthew, that familiar passage where Jesus teaches us a model of prayer. I'm reading from chapter 6, beginning with the seventh verse in the New Revised Standard Version. {Read Matthew 6:7-13 NRSV}

Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."⁴ What an astonishing thing to pray! It acknowledges a will to surrender our personal and corporate kingdoms of this life in favor of the Kingdom of God. It recognizes that the Kingdom of God is nothing less than the entire and perfect will of God. And it proclaims that the Kingdom of God already exists in heaven. What remains is the completion of what began with the incarnation and was propelled forward like a slingshot on Easter Sunday- the invasion of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Incidentally, I suspect that's more or less why the early church added the doxology to the Lord's Prayer: "For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen." Jesus didn't teach us to pray that. Instead, we pray that as a determined affirmation of faith. Even as we pray that the Kingdom come, we affirm that the Kingdom already is, a Kingdom marked by the reign of God in power and glory. A Kingdom that will endure forever. A Kingdom that will remake all of creation. We see that Kingdom through the eyes of faith and affirm it with our "amen."

It's really quite a dangerous prayer, if you stop to think about it. When we pray, "thy kingdom come," we're consenting to and asking for the world around us to be turned on its head. We pray this every week we gather in worship. But are you really ready for your worldview to be flipped upside down? Are you really ready to die to yourself in order to enter the gates of this Kingdom?

³ Luke 19:11. Ibid

⁴ Matthew 6:10. New Revised Standard Version.

The Kingdom of God has been a long time coming. What's changed for us on the other side of Easter? Are we simply stuck waiting for God to consummate the Kingdom on earth? Not at all. The Lord's Prayer was never meant to be a passive prayer. The resurrection changed everything because in dying for our sin, Jesus brought us into the family of God, active agents in ushering in the fullness of the Kingdom on earth. Jesus didn't send the Holy Spirit solely to comfort us in our affliction. Rather the Holy Spirit was like the yeast for the Body of Christ, activating us with spiritual gifts, guidance, and motivation to bring forth the new creation in whatever small ways we might do that. Easter People are agents for the transformation of creation into the image of the will of God. We recognize that the power of the Kingdom flows from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but we also own our own role as God's change agents in the world.

Can you see how we're living in a unique time in salvation history? Before Christ came, the King hadn't yet come into his Kingdom, and God's people were living, and dying, without the revelation of Jesus Christ that we take for granted every day. It's a glorious thing to be Easter People, living on the other side of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, breathing the Holy Spirit in and out in the joy and wonder of God's grace. On the other hand, because the King hasn't yet returned to complete his Kingdom, we still have the privilege of acting as God's representatives, fashioning creation into the perfect image of God through our small part in the Body of Christ.

Easter is an invitation for us to take an active role in ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven. It's a crazy, upside-down kingdom compared to what we're used to, so it's always going to be a bit of a learning curve for us, but we're blessed to have an abundance of scripture, the fellowship of the church, and the wisdom of the Spirit to help us along the way. It can be an overwhelming journey with no end in sight, but by faith we see and celebrate glimpses of the Kingdom in the world today and the glory of the Kingdom as it will be in its completion on earth.

Please take some time now to reflect on the Kingdom of God. Where do you see it today? What do you still long to see?



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