

## EXPERIENCING THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM

Last quarter, I was trying to think about what it was like to be one of the People of God, and as I began to brood on it, one thing that became abundantly clear was that in the center of my life was a deep yearning for stability. I found myself longing for some kind of stability in life; a stability of role. I experience deep tiredness and anxiety over changing roles, doing one thing one day and another thing the next day. I found myself yearning for a time when I could just do one thing, be one kind of person. I am yearning for stability of past, yearning to have a sort of niche of role that is somewhat eternal in this body instead of sensing a shift coming up at the end of every quarter. I experience a yearning for spirit anchors, for celebrations and for meaningful religious breaklooses, like the Other World, to grab hold of. I found a sense of profound rootlessness in experiencing my life. Also, a sense of anger, anger at setbacks and intrusions--a sense that if people didn't want their lives renewed then why should I bother? I experienced this especially over against the Finance Office. They give you this assignment to go run this program, and then you go down to the Finance Office and there is no money to do it with. It seems to me that if they really want you to run a program they ought to give you money to do it with instead of always being in your way. I experience anger at these kinds of setbacks and intrusions. You sense that your life is just being stepped on. There is anger at people who see the vision of social demonstration and just refuse, anger at people who would see the promise of Town Meeting and just refuse. Anger at my own colleagues for not being what I thought they ought to be.

At the same time an experience of a kind of indifference toward religious ceremonies and celebrations, a sense that they're somehow bland and somehow unevocative of the Mystery anymore. I have a sense of them going dry. Celebrations fill me with dread. If somebody says we're going to have a celebration I say, "Oh no, not a celebration." The thought of going to religious ceremonies is filled, not with anticipation of the experience of the Mystery, but with dread of the blandness.

And finally, there is a sense of the exciting missional events obviously happening other than where I am. There's great missional expenditure taking place but it is not in my sector. There are great miracles taking place but not where I am. And of course, people tell me that that is happening and intellectually I can justify it but deep down inside I sense that I'm on the wrong front, that I really belong on some other front. This experience, I have become convinced, is not an aberration, but really is the experience of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God comes first of all as judgement. When you look at the teachings of Jesus you begin to see that the Kingdom of God is not some sort of social or ethical betterment or any kind of spiritual euphoria, or a psychological coming together, but it is in the first instance, the experience of judgement. When you look at the New Testament you see at least four things in the teachings of Jesus that relate to the Kingdom of God. The first thing that gets said over and over again, is that the Kingdom of God is a miraculous event. It's not a gradual coming to be, it's not some sort of gradual development on the historical level, it's not man's getting better socially or dealing with social ills. The Kingdom of God is a socio-spirit event that takes place. The parables of Jesus having to do with the seeds (the mustard seed, and the Kingdom of God is the yeast) are not so much references to gradual developments in history as a kind of explosion from very small beginnings. It is a magnitudinous relationship. It is this miraculous event that is referred to as the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God comes without man's help. Man can do nothing to impede the coming of the Kingdom nor can he do anything to aid its coming. It is God's Kingdom that is coming to be, pressing itself upon man and man's stories about life. This miraculous event comes, and Jesus warned us to be careful of those who say, "Lo here, lo there" comes the Kingdom, for those are false priests. When the Kingdom comes you'll know and its meaning will press itself powerfully upon your life. It's an event that erupts in the midst of history rather than a gradual culmination of historical experience.

In fact, the second thing that Jesus used to say was that the Kingdom of God when it comes will sweep away the old order. The old order will be swept away and a new order established. What man holds up to be valuable as the gradual culmination of history and society are all going to be swept away in the coming of the Kingdom. When the Kingdom comes the new order will be established. The Kingdom comes as judgement on the wicked and vindication of the righteous. All of this poetry seems to point to a sense that when the Kingdom comes it is not the final fulfillment of your wishes. First of all it is radical judgement on your wishes. The future is radical judgement on the social and intellectual and religious structures that you spent your time building. The Kingdom comes and judges those structures, sweeps them away and judges what is wicked and vindicates what is righteous and those will be made clear.

Thirdly, Jesus kept saying that what the People of God have to do in anticipation of the Kingdom is to get ready and that if you weren't ready, the Kingdom of God could sweep over you unawares. Be not like a foolish virgin who spends all her oil here and there and everywhere. Be ready for the coming of the Kingdom. And, if you are ready, stay ready was the other part of the message. Don't get ready and then get unready, but get ready and stay ready. And, be awake. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus kept coming upon the disciples sleeping over the dread of watching a human being come to terms with the suffering that he is going to have to undergo to do the mission that he set out to do. Their response to seeing that kind of struggle was to go to sleep. You don't get a sense of anger as much as profound disappointment that those who had decided to be the People of God were not staying ready. They were losing their readiness. They were falling asleep in the face of the demand of being the People of God. Jesus comes and announces that this is the time of decision. When the Kingdom comes you must decide where your loyalty lies. Is your loyalty with the old order? Or is your loyalty with the new order? Is your loyalty with the plane of history and the establishment of the kingdoms of man? Or is your loyalty finally to the future of God and His establishment? Fourthly, he always seems to say that getting ready and staying ready has to do with deeds of obedience to God's will and deeds of confidence in God's promises. Jesus makes a powerful case that it's these deeds of obedience and confidence that are what the People of God are about in anticipation of the Kingdom. He makes a powerful witness over against individual piety as what the People of God are about. In fact, the whole conflict with the Pharisees was not so much to come over against them because they were bad people but because they exchanged individual piety for deeds of confidence and deeds of obedience to God's future covenant of being. These four things that seem to be said over and over and over again about the Kingdom leads me to the belief that we have experienced this encounter in our life as mission and in our individual lives in our struggle to be mission.

When we talk about our experience of the Kingdom it becomes clear that our major problem with the Kingdom of God is that it is, in fact, God's Kingdom instead of our own. If it were our own kingdom we wouldn't have any problem with it, but because it's God's Kingdom it becomes very troublesome to us. It is troublesome because the values are not our values. What is valuable to God's Kingdom is not what's valuable to the kingdoms that we've created. What God loves is not what we love. What God calls wicked is not what we call wicked. The kindling of the Kingdom of God comes as alien to us. It is alien because it is God's kingdom instead of our own. It's the experience of the coming to be of God's future over against the future that we've longed for and hoped for out of the anxieties of our own lives. God's future unfolds before us and it's different from the future that we hoped to be. We build our plans, or models and our campaigns and we move them out into history but they run up against God's future unfolding differently from our own future as we anticipated it. The encounter with God's Kingdom exposes the kingdoms that we have set up as authentic living. God's future comes and judges the future that we hoped to be. It exposes the kingdoms we've set up as a liar. The best analogy I can use is that if somebody came into the building who looked like Elizabeth Caperton, talked like Elizabeth Caperton and went around saying she was Elizabeth Caperton, we'd believe her until Elizabeth Caperton came in the door and suddenly by seeing both of them you would know which was the liar and which was telling the truth. God's Kingdom comes that way. It comes like a thief in the night. Suddenly one day you see that you've been living a lie because the truth stands exposed to you. God's future, the future that will come to be, comes and judges the illusionary futures that we had bet our lives on and

invested our lives in. I think that's why, in many ways, it's no coincidence that this experience is talked about in political terms as a kingdom. The Old Testament Jews linked sin much more with a sense of treason than with immorality. Their discussion of sin is much more like a discussion of treason, and of being a traitor to the state. You can catch the sense in this image of the Kingdom of God that dread over the unknownness of the future tempts us to set up our own kingdoms with ourselves as kings, with our own values as law. That's revealed as treason against the real king, the king of the future that will be, the creation that really is. This sense of treason, of being a traitor to the depths of human authenticity is the sense of the refusal of the Kingdom and why it's so important to be ready for the Kingdom. Being a traitor and selling out to one's own hopes and anxieties about the Kingdom is precisely what it means not to get ready for the Kingdom of God.

In the New Testament, Satan is the archetype of the refusal to serve in profound allegiance to God. His statement, attributed to him by other literature, is, "I'd rather be king in hell than serve in heaven." That is, of course, the archetype of our own struggle—whether or not to be loyal citizens to God's future or to continue to try to direct and determine the future by our own values and standards. It's a question of allegiance—where does your loyalty finally lie? Does it lie with the future that will actually unfold, in its own time, or have you given your primary loyalty to the future that you are anxiously hoping will come into being?

All of that allows me to see four dynamics, which are the only new things I have to say about the Kingdom of God. There are four dynamics of the experience of the coming of the Kingdom.

It seems to be clear that the Kingdom of God image was a Jewish concept. It came out of the Old Testament heritage. In the Old Testament heritage and in the life of the People of God, the Jews, there was one event that was the central event of their lifetime, of their faith and of their community. That was the Exodus event. The exodus of man is the central event of the Old Testament. The exodus event is also the central event of the New Testament because the New Testament is the story of the vindicated People of God. In the New Testament, Jesus is the Israel of faith, as opposed to the Israel of unfaith in the Old Testament. When Jesus goes out into the desert he doesn't murmur against God; he stands in faith. When he crosses the river Jordan, it's in faithful allegiance to God rather than in unconsciousness. If you look at that exodus event, it reveals to you the pattern of the experience of the coming of the Kingdom, and it comes in four dynamics.

The first is the promise. The promise of God comes and you are made aware of it. God's promise, of course, is what you can hold in a concept like love, forgiveness, or grace. God's promise is the promise of fulfilled living and is experienced in moments of wholeness in life, when the old inauthenticities, refusals, despairs and guilts are healed in a radical saving event of God's mercy. We talk about this as the grace event, the Jesus Christ event, the event of the Word in one's life and the event of healing. This is where a human being gets a glimpse of the Kingdom, like Moses on the other side of the river Jordan. You get a glimpse of the Kingdom in this hour of wholeness when your life is healed and you sense yourself saved or redeemed.

The RS-I experience is this dynamic of the promise of the Kingdom of God, when you sense your life justified out of your faith in the love of God alone. You sense you are justified not by action or works or by individual peity, but solely out of the unmerited love of God in the midst of tremendous inauthenticity and guilt. You finally perceive that the life you cannot possibly say yes to or forgive or receive unto yourself has just been given a radical yes. You could not possibly do it, but the yes has been said and it's up to you then to either live out of that yes or refuse it.

The second dynamic is that of the election on the other side of the promises of God. One either decides to respond to his election to be the People of God or decides to take another role, and be some other kind of people—the people of self, the people of the family, the people of sensual desire, the people of the social task, or whatever. This election is a proclamation of the Kingdom and is a kind of winnowing of the faithful. It's a purgation of lingering allegiances. The Dark Night of the Soul is when you've decided to say yes to being

the People of God, to accept and be confident in the promises of God. Then you begin a process of purgation of old allegiances, the boiling away of old attachments, the boiling away of old loyalties to some sovereign other than God. For me, it is the genesis of that image that many are called but few are chosen. For many hear the call of election and many enter the process of being the People of God only to be unable to stand before the winnowing and the purgation. They finally realize that some allegiance to some small part of life really is more important than their authenticity, more important than being a fruitful and loyal citizen to God. This election comes and it is a painful period. Many people have mistaken that period as despair itself, but it is rather a state of life that you either attend to in despair or in faith. If you really are the People of God, if you really are the elected one, then you relate to it in faith as a great opportunity to die to self-idolatry and to self-allegiance and to move on into a new period which is really a hard time; namely, the testing.

The testing comes not by God, but by the enemy of humanness itself. The enemy of humanness itself sees you struggling to make your allegiance to God and decides to put you to the test in this struggle. Jesus went immediately from the consciousness of his election into the desert to be tested. As you remember, the words were that he was led by the spirit into the desert to be tested. It is true that only after placing both hands on your authenticity and daring to die to self idolatry, family idolatry, idolatry to the state and so forth, do you really find yourself led by that very decision over against the periods of incredible testing where the enemy of authentic humanness tests you, according to the scriptures, in three ways.

The first test is whether you are allied to God or allied to your creaturely compulsions, your bodily desires, your spirit desires, or your desires for companionship, comfort, or status. This temptation comes and desire in this hour reigns supreme. It is a terrible moment and God ceases to have real substance in your life. Your allegiance to God becomes a fine intellectual and theological ideal over against the reality of desire and the prospect of death. Jesus did not succumb to this. Our symbol of what it means to live in the Kingdom of God simply tells Satan that you cannot live by the desires of the flesh. He says, to paraphrase a bit, it has its place in the scheme of things but you cannot make a life out of responding to the flesh.

But that only gives way to another test by the enemy of humanness. This is the test of spiritual presumptuousness or pride. You have resisted the temptation to give your allegiance finally over to your creaturely compulsions so the enemy of humanness says, "Why don't you just be loyal to your pride? Why don't you leap off the temple here to see if the promises of God really are worth anything? Is God a liar or can God be trusted? Then he leads you up to the temple and says, "Go ahead and jump off into some kind of foolish behavior. Jump off into a sloppiness of life and see if you really are received. After all, if your life is forgiven anything you do is all right and there are no real dangers. Your forgiveness will save you from any real danger." This is a very subtle temptation because when you put God to the test and call God a liar, you cease to be a man of faith. Therefore, whatever protection faith had against temptation is gone and the minute you leap, you've given over yourself not to faith, but to despair.

This temptation to be a pride-filled human being, to set yourself up as secure because you're part of the Order or because you're part of the Movement, part of Development or part of something else is a real temptation. It results in getting sloppy about one's life, getting sloppy about who you talk to, what you read, getting sloppy about who your saints and heroes are, and getting sloppy about thinking through what life is all about. This sloppiness comes and the devil says, "Well, don't worry about it, there's no real danger." But of course the man of faith knows there are tremendous dangers. You can get yourself into a pattern of living that takes you on a 25-year detour from authenticity of living. You find yourself way out off the freeway of authenticity on a back road somewhere unable to get off. You read a book like *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, and you're just shocked by the reality of getting into a self-destructive pattern, not even realizing that it is self-destructive or that it is a pattern, because you don't see the pattern. You are unable to break out of it until it literally destroys you. This, of course, is the danger of this temptation.

The third kind of test is one of self-consciously selling out. Here the enemy of humanness takes off the mask and bargains. He says, "Here's what we'll do. If you trade your authenticity, I'll give you what you want in this world." Now, this is not as preposterous as it seems and those stories about people selling their souls to the devil are true. The man who has successfully resisted letting his life be ruled by his creaturely compulsions, and a human being who has successfully resisted the temptation of spiritual pride is a powerful human being. He has got discipline, wisdom about life, and powers of the spirit in terms of standing over against collapse, despair and hatred. He is a powerful human being and the enemy of humanness says, "Look, why not just call it shrewd living? Why not call it being a practical human being or something like that?" Of course this sounds good. Unless you are aware of all these tricks. Here he's taking off the mask and says, "You live a life of suffering and struggle over against an unknown edge, for what? For authenticity? What is that, after all? I mean, authenticity and 15¢ will buy you a newspaper. Why not wise up and use your powers to get something for yourself; more status, less responsibility, more appreciation, more satisfaction." This is a terrible time, terrible temptation and a terrible test in the face of being part of the People of God. This time of testing is just one of the hours of great struggle, all of these are hours of great struggle.

The last test that comes out in the scriptures is the deliverance. God has promised that He will not allow you to be tested beyond that which you can successfully endure and so He delivers you. He delivers all men of faith who put their confidence in God instead of in their own powers. Time and time and time again, the scriptures are testimony to the deliverance of the People of God overagainst their trials. This is not just mythology or allegory, this is a part of the dynamic of the Kingdom of God, that God does deliver. He has promised that He'll deliver and he does deliver. This is the faith and the confidence of the People of God as they go about doing the task. This deliverance comes as a sense that all needs are provided for. It is that story of Abraham where he asks God where the sacrifice is on the way to Mt. Moriah and God tells him that He is going to provide a sacrifice and He tells him who He is providing. You can believe that the enemy of humanness put him to the test on the way up Mt. Moriah. Or, Moses. There is another image of this kind of thing. You can imagine the whole image of Moses out there in the desert with his people, and they are murmuring and they want to go back to Egypt and they are saying all this authenticity and being linked up with God is a crock. "Let's go on back to some good living, to eating melons and dealing with those good-looking Egyptian women. Let's get out of this nonsense here, this barren living, this living with not enough funds, this living with in-kind sandwiches." And, poor Moses stumbled out in the desert to commune with God and says to Him, "Why did you bring these people out to the desert?" And you know what God says: "Moses, YOU brought these people out here to the desert." The People of God are responsible, but He will provide. He will deliver you from your enemies. And, of course, He does. The earth is given back to you in this moment as not a source of pitfalls, but as the environment for living a life of faith. Social demonstration and Town Meeting and all of that becomes the vessel, the form out of which deeds of faith are done. Development is form in which deeds of faith and deeds of confidence in the promises of God are done. It is an hour of deliverance.

This is what I discerned as I struggled with trying to come to terms with this encounter. These four dynamics seem to be everywhere. I think it is no accident that when people encounter their election to be the People of God and their election to be citizens of the Kingdom of God that it is on the mountain top all the time. It is on Mt. Moriah or Mt. Sinai, or Mt. Calgary. And it is the sense that the Kingdom that you have been elected to is not of this world, but it is in this world. The symbol of the mountain is the symbol of the "in-but-not-of" as you stand before the fact that the Kingdom of God is the explosive consciousness of the unfolding of God's future. That God's future is unfolding ever anew. And pressing itself powerfully upon your own life and the life of your loved ones. This unfolding of God's future and deciding to be loyal to God's future calls into question all other loyalties. And raises the question of what loyalty do you ultimately have? And, of course, if you read the Bible, you read yourself as those who struggled to maintain loyalty to God but were always falling short.

But, also, when you read Jesus or when you read Moses you read yourself. They are not impossible ideals. They are who we are when we finally have decided to give our allegiance to God. To stand before the unfolding of God's future and to act out our lives in confidence and obedience to that future rather than in rebellion and determination to set up our own future. And this coming into being of God's future is the call and it is the struggle of what it means to be the People of God and what it means to live in God's Kingdom.