

The Kingdom of God and the Church

Bruce Chilton wrote this:

‘At no point in the sayings of Jesus is there a clear, prosaic description of the kingdom of God or of the moment or the method of its coming. It is out there in the future but also near, within us...Deliberate paradox is obviously part and parcel of Jesus’ message.’ (page 99 of ‘Pure Kingdom.’)

‘Jesus’ vision was of a divine activity that was under way’. It was made up of ‘forceful, passionate and demanding love, embracing God’s people in the purity of forgiveness, and reaching out from Jerusalem to embrace all....At the same time the Kingdom was a dawning reality, not a completed result.’ (ibid page 145)

Healings and Exorcisms.

'If I drive out demons by the finger (Spirit) of God then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.' (Luke 11 v 20; Matt. 12 v 28).

The Mission of the Seventy.

This occurs in Luke 10 and because Jesus is sending them out to extend his work it is inevitable that their tasks reflect his own expectations of what the coming Kingdom will be like.

Hans Kung, the great Roman Catholic theologian, put it like this:

‘This secular world....today is not only taken into account in Christendom but largely, consciously approved and assisted in its development. (We need) to recognise the signs of the times, to share the needs and hopes of modern man and actively to collaborate in solving the urgent problems of the world....The Churches today no longer want to be backward subcultures....they want to break out of their self-imposed seclusion.’ (page 28 of ‘Being a Christian.’ 1978).

The Behaviour of Children.

‘Whoever does not grab the Kingdom of God as a child will never enter it.’ (Mark 10 v15; Luke 18 v 17).

The Place of Meals.

‘The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ (Matthew 11 v 19).

The Lords Prayer

The first part of the Prayer runs like this:

Father,

Holy is your Name

Your Kingdom come.

The second part of the Prayer runs like this:

Give us daily bread

Forgive our sins

Deliver us from temptation and evil

We need constancy. And this is where the Church fits in. It provides the forum and framework in which followers of Jesus are enabled to attain constancy. It should give them the support sustenance and guidance they need to combat the allurements of temptation and error and instead to persist in their response to the grace of the kingdom and the priorities which follow from that. This means the Church's role is defined by the Kingdom.

As John Caputo puts it: 'The Church is Plan B...its existence is provisional and whatever is constructed is de-constructible...The idea behind the Church is to give way to the Kingdom, to proclaim and enact and finally disappear into the Kingdom, all the while resisting the temptation of confusing itself with the kingdom.' (page 35). The Kingdom sets the agenda for the Church and that is always a missional agenda because the Kingdom is concerned with the wider purposes of God in creation.

Question: If the church were to look at itself from 'inside the world' how might it want to change?

It is the Kingdom of God and the Church of God. So if we are clearer about who God is and how God is at work in the world we should have a better idea of how the Kingdom and the Church can participate in that work.

In Greek the word for compassion is *splagchnizomai* and literally means 'internal organs' or 'guts'. It points to being moved so deeply that you feel it in the pit of your stomach. And this Greek word corresponds to the Hebrew word 'rachamin' which translates 'womb' and is associated with God's compassion in the Psalms of the Old Testament. It is a rich seam of theology and it crops up again in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When the father espies the returning son afar off Jesus says that he was 'filled with compassion' and it is that same word *splagchnizomai* which he uses.

The work of that Kingdom, says Peter Hodgson, is
recognisable as

Emancipatory

Ecological

Dialogical

And wherever those concerns are at the forefront
of human activity there the Kingdom is breaking
in.

In essence the Kingdom of God is the manifestation of God's love for the whole creation and its centre-point is Jesus.

Yet this very fact presents us with a paradox because as Jesus dies on the cross we see both the strength and the weakness of God's love.

How fit for purpose are we in promoting the work of God's Kingdom in the world? Have we become so absorbed by our own internal concerns and encumbered by all the demands of institutional life, not least of which is keeping 'the show on the road' week by week, that we lack the energy and vision to focus on the bigger concerns demanded by the Kingdom of God?

My answer is that as priest and people all you need is the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Nothing else. This is the Church's 'portable Kingdom pack'. It enables the Church to hold on to everything it needs in order to fulfil its work as the handmaid of the Kingdom of God.

What does the meal tell us about the Kingdom of God?

- **The bread and wine** link back through grain and grape to the natural world.
- **The bread and wine** also encompass the full extent of human life.
- **Commemoration.** ‘Every time we eat the bread and drink the cup we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ says Paul in 1 Cor. 11 v 26.
- **Flexibility.** Do you know that wonderful passage in Dom Gregory Dix’s ‘The Shape of the Liturgy’ which exults in the range of this sacrament ?
- **Communality.** The meal is a shared experience.
- **Missionality.** Right at the heart of every commemoration of the Last Supper there is a reminder that the circle of faith needs to open up outwards and be interested in outsiders.

SUMMARY

These are 'snapshots' of what the Spirit does constantly and consistently through time: hovering invisibly but creatively over the whole creation and leading it in the direction of new creation. The Church is called to share in the work of the Spirit and so it must seek to move in harmony with the Spirit.

How can the church re-hoist its sails in such a way that it will 'catch' the wind of God's Spirit and move in the direction of God's kingdom?