

A decorative oval frame with a double-line border. Inside, there are two stylized floral motifs on the left and right sides, each with five petals and a central circle. The frame encloses the text.

THE LOST
KINGDOM OF GOD

by

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Discussion Paper
No 4

CHRISTIANS
AWAKENING to a
NEW
AWARENESS
(CANA)

THE LOST KINGDOM OF GOD

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This is a CANA Publication

The Good News of Jesus the Christ is about our ultimate human fulfilment. Although the whole of creation has been moving towards this destiny since its inception, it was only after several million years of humanity's existence upon this planet that human consciousness became aware that there was a destiny ahead. With the coming among us of Jesus the Christ, this destiny was made known to us as God's design for creation (Ephesians 3:5-6).

Jesus spoke of the situation of humanity's fulfilment with the metaphor, 'Kingdom of God', understanding that title as the situation in which life is ordered by interior, spiritual power rather than by external, human-controlled power. In the context of the Palestine of his own times, Jesus was illustrating, through his own life and teaching, how God would run the world if God, not Caesar, sat on the imperial throne.

Jesus' message was put across by the manner in which he lived, his moral values, his ways of relating to God and to people. It gave evidence of a new set of values which he proposed to all he encountered - and through them to all humanity. His verbal message was by way of parables, almost all of which are about the Kingdom (forty tell us what the Kingdom is like and twenty-five contain a warning to those who do not embrace it) and these were offered as an explanation of his life-style.

For those of us who have been brought up within the Christian tradition it is difficult to appreciate that Jesus' 'Good News' was not about the Church but about the Kingdom, the destiny of the whole of humanity. (In fact, only twice is the word 'church' found on the lips of Jesus, both recorded in Matthew's Gospel [16:18 and 18:18] and from their context many scholars believe these two passages were added later, after a church had come into being.)

The phrase 'Kingdom of God', as an expression of the vision of Jesus, has lost its appeal to us of the western world in the 21st century. The word 'Kingdom' conjures up images of knights and castles and implies a masculine God. Since Jesus was not speaking of a geographical location, a happier expression might be the 'Reign of God', or had he been employing today's language he might have

spoken instead of the Christ Age, or the Age of Universality, or the New Civilisation of Love, all of which are more meaningful expressions in a world where there are few kingdoms remaining.¹ However, while allowing for its inadequacy, I will continue to use the term Kingdom of God because of its biblical origin.

JESUS MANIFESTS THE KINGDOM

It can be supposed, from the reading of some Church documents, that God only inaugurated his design for humanity with the appearance of Jesus in human history. Jesus did not inaugurate the Kingdom, as they often say: he manifested it. Why had it not been revealed to humanity before? I believe this revelation had to wait for that moment in our history when human consciousness had developed to the point where the concept was able to be understood, and in consequence, responded to. (We have to admit that even today, two thousand years later, there are very few people who are able to live the unconditional love that is at the core of Kingdom-living!)

In the two million years or more during which the human species has inhabited Planet Earth, it is only in very recent history, over the last four thousand years, that any understanding at all of humanity having a divine destiny has begun to emerge. We can trace its development through the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. There we find a gradual shift in the perception of God, from the Israelites' belief in many gods, to their conviction that the Hebrew God was the greatest, most powerful god, to the notion that there was only one God. The consciousness of the Chosen People had to be gradually prepared over hundreds of years for the 'new thing' that Jesus was to introduce. Indeed, he himself being a product of his times and culture, was only able to reach his own state of consciousness on account of the evolutionary process that had preceded him.

During his short life Jesus achieved three things which are of such gigantic consequence that they potentially caused the whole of humanity to take a great evolutionary step forward in consciousness.

1. THE ANNOUNCEMENT

First, there was Jesus' announcement by action and word, in terms of the Kingdom, that God had a plan, a vision, a design for humanity and that with Jesus' own coming that promised new era was already being manifested (Luke 4:21).

It was coming true in his person because he lived with the belief that the Kingdom was present for the asking if only people would be open enough to "see" it and to draw upon its energy. It is this Kingdom dynamic that gives meaning to Jesus' whole life and even to his acceptance of an untimely death. He proclaimed: 'Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near' (Matthew 4:17), and 'after John [the Baptist] had been put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News from God. "The right time has come," he said, "and the Kingdom of God is near! Repent and believe the Good News"' (Mark 1:14-15).

It was this new era, under the influence of which he lived, that empowered Jesus in his mission: 'No, it is not Beelzebub, but God's Spirit, who gives me the power to drive out demons, which proves that the Kingdom of God has already come upon you' (Matthew 12:28, Luke 11:20).

John's Gospel, written with hindsight, could say: 'To all who accepted him he gave the power to become children of God' (1:12). The basis of John's sense of the new Kingdom is the new body of people who will put their trust in God, and do the things that Jesus was doing. They were to be action people, doing things together, spiritually united. Jesus does not simply preach about God, but preaches God-in-action, with and within humanity.

2. THE EMPOWERMENT

But Jesus was more than simply an example to us, giving us a model of how to live. By his life, death and rising to a higher form of life he empowered the whole of humankind to make the necessary breakthrough from our present powerlessness and assume the power of daughters and sons of God: to live a life in awareness of and governed by an entirely new humanity-God relationship, consequent upon which is a new person-to-person relationship.

This second achievement, the 'empowering', needs an explanation. We can find it in the innate human desire to become more, to grow, to be drawn towards a higher self. Consequently it is a characteristic of our human nature that it is always breaking new records of achievement. Why else the need for a constant updating of the Guinness Book of Records?! I speak here not of the achievements reached through the development of science, though that too is a human achievement, but of physical or moral achievement. It seems equally to be a characteristic of human nature that it requires the act of one human being to break through a barrier of human limitation, which once broken through, empowers the rest of humanity to follow. It is not a gift injected from the supernatural but the release of an energy hitherto untapped.

Examples abound. Over the thousands of years people had been plying between Dover and Calais it was only in 1875 that the first man, Captain Webb, succeeded in swimming across the English Channel. Now it has become an annual event. No one had ever succeeded in reaching the summit of Mount Everest until it was reached by the New Zealander Hillary and his Sherpa guide, Tensing, in 1953. Now that that barrier to human achievement has been broken, hundreds have reached the summit. In May 2000 a Nepalese Sherpa, aged 34, reached the summit more than four hours faster than the previous record-holder and that without using artificial oxygen. (The biologist, Rupert Sheldrake, explains this phenomenon of the influence of empowerment in terms of the Morphic Field.²)

To lift humanity out of its state of disintegration and raise it dynamically forward and upward towards a higher spiritual unity, as Teilhard de Chardin expresses it, there needed to be one person who would break through that barrier and in doing so empower the whole of humanity to follow the same path. Jesus was that person. He broke through the barrier of our personal slaveries to enter a new, completely liberated life.

3. THE GATHERING

Thirdly, Jesus gathered around him a group of people, a small community, which was to be a living declaration of this new style of life and relationships which he himself was witnessing. We notice that his choice was not from among the men of letters, the religious leaders, but of working men. What Jesus required was not disciples who could persuade people by their rhetoric but followers who themselves were so gripped by the new "Way" of living that the Good News would be declared through their own manner of life and by the explanation they gave of the values by which they lived. This was the seed which was later to grow into a Church, and to become the greatest cultural influence on western society for almost two millennia.

THE CHURCH FOCUSES THE KINGDOM

The Church's perennial task is to focus the Good News of the Gospel in a manner and in terms that are meaningful to each age. It does not present to us a series of disconnected doctrines. It is a single coherent message about the God-human relationship. Recall the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Letters and Papers from Prison*) 'Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life'. Indeed, it was not Jesus' intention to launch a new religion upon the world.

The focus of the Church's presentation can change, must change, from age to age and culture to culture, under the guidance of the Spirit. While not denying the value of other focuses from past periods of the Church's history, we are concerned today with that focus which holds increasing meaning for us in recent decades. The focus is returning to Jesus' original pronouncement of the Kingdom with all its implications. The Church is the community which gives witness to the world of what humanity is destined to become because the Church itself has become fully conscious of the world's destiny. That is the theory!

The Kingdom, being greater than the Church, is brought about by all people of good will, some of whom will be Church members, the majority will not. These promoters of the Kingdom are the New People of God of our New Testament times. 'Not everyone who calls me "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do' (Matthew 7:21).

Our own times are marked by a change in orientation from a Church which is over against the world, drawing people into its membership for their salvation, to a Church which sees itself as an instrument of change within society. From a Church which understood its mission to be that of attracting people to itself, to a Church with a mission to go out and evangelise human culture and values, transforming humanity from within and making it new.

A key to understanding and acceptance of all the changes that have taken place in Church life and thinking in recent decades is found in the paradigm shift that has occurred: a shift from a Christianity which is Church-centred to a Christianity which is Kingdom-centred.

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM?

If the Good News about the Kingdom of God is our new pivotal point - or rather our return to the Gospel pivotal point - we naturally want to ask what exactly did Jesus mean when he spoke about the Kingdom. What are its characteristics? What is its essence? We are not helped by the fact that Jesus never said in so many words what exactly he meant by the phrase. In our western way of thinking we like to have definitions, to build a mental box, so that we can cope with a concept. Not so in eastern thinking. The Kingdom is not simply a 'thing' which can be defined. It is a vision, it is a human experience.

We can, however, pick up a number of clues which help us to build up a mental picture.

1. The first, as we have mentioned, is by observing the way Jesus lived: his ministry of healing, his disregard for social hierarchy, his table fellowship, his predilection for the marginalised and outcasts of society. He himself summed up his mission in the words of Isaiah when he announced his manifesto in the synagogue at Nazareth. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind: to set free the oppressed and announce the time has come when the Lord will save his people,' and he added: 'This passage of Scripture has come true today as you heard it being read' (Luke 4:16-21).

Later, Luke has him declare the driving force of his mission: 'I must preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God in other towns also because that is what God sent me to do' (4:43). He was not sent to die on a cross or 'to suffer for our sins' as Victorian hymns would have us believe. His brutal end came as a consequence of his utter faithfulness to what he understood to be his life's purpose.

2. We have already spoken of his parables - these are the second clue - the beauty of which is that they can be heard by, and their

message transmitted to, every level of consciousness, each understanding them at the level of their awareness.

3. We find another clue at the end of Jesus' life, during the Last Supper with his closest friends when he opens his heart to them. He prays that 'they all may be one, Father. May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you' (John 17:21). He is desiring for all humanity an experience of the state of unity consciousness which was his own experience.
4. While the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) have Jesus declare his life's purpose in terms of manifesting the Kingdom, John's gospel has Jesus declare 'I have come in order that you may have life - life in all its fullness' (John 10:10). Kingdom living means living out our full potentiality.

Putting these various expressions of his mission together we discover the essence of the Kingdom: 'Relationships' - God's design for all humanity to live in harmony, together and with the whole of creation. And the key to bringing this about is to live recognising and respecting the presence of the Divine in all creatures and in the whole of creation. It was Jesus' ability to practise this recognition that explains all his relationships. He saw how divinely precious every single person is: the outcast, the leper, the disenfranchised, the child.

Jesus' breaking down the customary and conventional human barriers caused antagonism with the religious leaders and eventually led to his death as a criminal. From his behaviour we can see that there is a double dimension to the Kingdom. To Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who came to Jesus by night, (John 3:1-12) he told of the need of a personal conversion, so profound that it is as if one were to be born again. In another place (Mark 1:15) Jesus calls for a *metanoia*, a change of mind-set, a shift into a higher state of consciousness. But the Kingdom also has a social dimension, demanding the conversion of society, the life of new relationships we mentioned above. Paul speaks of this when he says 'God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of the righteousness, peace and joy which the Holy Spirit gives' (Romans 14:17). 'Righteousness' is better translated in this context as 'right relating'.

THE CHURCH vis-a-vis THE KINGDOM

To follow Jesus' injunction: 'Set your hearts on his Kingdom first, and his justice and all the rest will be given to you' (Matthew 6:33) means not only giving the Kingdom primacy but, in the words of Pope Paul VI: 'By comparison everything else becomes "the rest" which is given in addition. Only the Kingdom therefore is absolute and it makes everything else relative' ³. Daring words from a Pope! It implies that the Church is relative to the Kingdom, part of the 'everything else'. Followed logically this means that if ever the Church placed itself above the Kingdom or in any way hampered the emergence of the Kingdom, the Church would have lost its *raison d'être*. The Church, as the Christian community, is present to give a witness to Kingdom-living which means it will always be a minority community in the world, the heaven, and no more. Its mission, like that of Jesus, is to manifest the Kingdom; not to gather as many people as possible into its membership.

Understanding the Kingdom in terms of right-relating, the fulfilment of relationships, can give a coherent meaning to so many seemingly unrelated Christian beliefs. Heaven is when (not where!) relationships are experienced to perfection, while Hell is when there is an irreparable absence of relationships. The Church practises Baptism, a person's commitment to develop relationships in Christ, and Reconciliation, the healing of relationships. The Eucharist is the celebration of our community relationships in Christ. While Virtue can be understood as all the good acts which build up relationships, Vice or Sin is all that is destructive of relationships. Prayer is the language of community relationships. We are invited to be Co-creators which means to build up the right environment in society for relationships to grow. This highlights the scandal of a disunited Church!

The Church exercises its prophetic role in the world by reading the 'Signs of the Times', in the biblical sense of that expression (Matthew 16:1-3), signs of God's action in the world bringing about His design. Jesus himself was just such a sign and John's Gospel refers to his miracles as signs. Exercising this task - the task of eve-

ry Christian - means proclaiming and committing ourselves to support those trends and significant events (those which have repercussions beyond the actual event) which are promoting the Kingdom, while denouncing and opposing those which militate against its development. Hence as Karl Barth said, a Christian should have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other!

Wherever in the world we see actions bringing about healing, liberating, reconciling, uniting, and good news being given to the poor, there we see the Kingdom breaking through. It may be happening within the Church or outside the Church and even despite the Church.

SUMMARY

1. The main recorded example and teaching of Jesus is about living as a "Kingdom of God person" by recognising the presence of the Divine in everyone.
2. The Christian Church and individual Christians should be promoting Kingdom values, not Church doctrine or membership. This may be done in areas of life totally unconnected with the Church.
3. The new awareness of our day is about recognising these possibilities and encouraging the development of Kingdom values to transform society.

I end with two quotations. The first from Dom Bede Griffiths, the Benedictine monk who developed an ashram in India:

'The organisation of the Church, with its doctrine of Trinity and Incarnation and its eucharistic ritual, has no other purpose than to communicate love, to create a community of love, to unite all people in the eternal Ground of Being which is present in the heart of everyone. This is the criterion by which the Church is to be judged, not by the forms of its doctrine or ritual, but by the reality of the love which it manifests.' (*Return to the Centre*)

And from Bishop John Spong: 'The business of the Church is to love people into life' (*Resurrection: Myth or Reality*).

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Adrian B. Smith. *A Reason for Living and Hoping: A Christian Appreciation of the Emerging New Era of Consciousness*. St Paul's Publications, London. 2002.

Reading the "signs of the times" Smith is convinced that humanity is entering a new evolutionary phase, an evolution in consciousness. He proposes that this is to be expected if we understand correctly what Jesus was meaning in his "Kingdom of God" announcement.

Adrian B. Smith. *A New Framework for Christian Belief*. John Hunt Publishing. UK. 2002.

This book has been described as a "thought-provoker" for Christians searching for a more meaningful understanding of their faith. It contains 27 short chapters, each headed by a sentence giving "A Traditional Understanding" and "A Contemporary Understanding" of some Christian doctrine. The chapter then unpacks the meaning of the latter. There is also a suggested format for using the chapters as the basis of discussion in groups.

Jim Marion. *Putting on the Mind of Christ: The inner work of Christian Spirituality*. Hampton Roads Publishing Co. USA. 2000.

The author, a former Catholic monk, a mystic and a lawyer, proposes that for Christians who are disaffected with contemporary Christianity, there is another way to experience the true spirituality of Christianity, namely to "live the Kingdom of God" while living as a human being on Earth. It is not just for Heaven!

Thomas Sheehan. *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God became Christianity*. Crucible (Thorsons Publishing) UK. 1988.

Sheehan, a professor of philosophy at Loyola University, Chicago, challenges all the traditionally held beliefs about Jesus of

Nazareth. He asserts that at the root of Christianity lies a fundamental difference between the way Jesus apparently saw himself - a prophet of the Kingdom - and how the Church came to interpret him as the divine Son of God.

James W. Douglass. *The Nonviolent Coming of God*.
Orbis Books. New York. 1991.

Douglass explores the parallels between the situation of Jesus, living in anticipation of the impending destruction of Jerusalem, and our own choice today between non-violence and non-existence. Jesus' call for a radical conversion, in his Kingdom message, is as urgent today as then.

Charles Elliott. *Praying the Kingdom: Towards a Political Spirituality*. Darton, Longman & Todd. London. 1985.

This former director of Christian Aid asks if guilt and a sense of powerlessness can be creative starting points in the search for a spirituality based on the Kingdom vision. He provides material for meditation on the Kingdom and many helpful thoughts for prayer on this theme.

