

## Preaching the Kingdom of God

### Introduction

Jesus clearly went about preaching “the Gospel” or “the Good News”, and this good news concerned the “kingdom of God”. As followers of Jesus Christ, like Jesus’ first disciples, we are commanded by him with these words:

*Mark 16:15-17*

*He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

*NIV*

It is clear his words present a choice of life and death to all mankind, and that his followers need to convey this message to everyone. This message concerns the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ.

In the Bible, we are told quite clearly that the Kingdom of (belonging to) God is a reality. The expressions about His Kingdom are used extensively and they contrast with kingdoms of (belonging to) men. Here are predominant examples used in both Testaments:

your (God’s) kingdom  
the kingdom  
kingdom of Israel  
my (God’s) kingdom  
kingdom of the LORD  
kingdom of heaven  
kingdom of God  
kingdom of our Lord

These expressions abound in the scriptures.

It would be conclusive to say that any follower of Jesus is bound to preach the Gospel of the kingdom of God. What exactly does this entail? What guidance is offered for us in preaching?

In the book of Revelation, we read of a future age in this way:

*Rev 11:15-18*

*15 The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:*

*"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,*

*and he will reign for ever and ever."*

*16 And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying:*

*"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was ,because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.*

*18 The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great - and for destroying those who destroy the earth."*

NIV

To summarise, this passage states a time of triumphant transition where worldly kingdoms are being absorbed by God's Kingdom, which involves judgement and reward. It is wonderful to share passages like these with friends and interested people during Bible study.

But to be honest, this passage is not an accurate description of the Kingdom of God at all - even though one may wish to think it is at first reading. One could argue showing our friends this and similar futuristic passages are misleading in the context of preaching the Kingdom of God.

In fact, the passage above rather describes a transition of kingdoms of the world being absorbed into and already existing kingdom ruled over by God. What then about the twenty four elders who mentioned that God would have "...taken your great power and have begun to reign."? Again, this is simply answered when taken in context, as God would have "begun to reign" over the kingdoms of the world having intervened in their disastrous affairs.

### **Defining the Kingdom of God**

Reverting back to Christ's command, if we are to preach this good news, what exactly is the Kingdom of God by definition?

Considering this question, things become incredibly clear. The answer is simple: it is from everlasting to everlasting. The Kingdom of God has always been and will always endure. Therefore God has always been King, and He has always ruled over it. The psalmist endorses this with these words:

*Ps 145:13*

*3 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.*

NIV

Clearly then, the Kingdom of God has always been and, moreover, will always be.

To further clarify, what about this expression "kingdom"? Why is God's holy realm described as a "kingdom"? As always, it is healthy to consider the context of these Biblical expressions involving the word "kingdom" listed at the beginning of this article. When were they expressed? In what situations were they uttered? What purpose did they serve in being said and recorded?

The answers to these questions are helpful. At the time of using these expressions, kings ruled in various parts of the earth. There were good and bad kings – kings who ruled wisely and those who were power hungry and bent on destruction. These kingdoms waxed and waned as time went by. Their boundaries fluctuated in times of strength and weakness. Reference to these various kingdoms are always uttered in relation to Israel – a nation chosen by God as His people. In fact, we know full well these people are described, in contrast to other kingdoms, as establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Their first king was God, and then because they asked for "a king like the nations around them" as recorded in 1 Samuel, he graciously allowed someone to represent Him as king within the land of Israel.

But was this "the Kingdom of God"? To be honest, no – it was not. It was only part of it. In order to seek definition, we again look at "the kingdoms of men". These kingdoms started off relatively small and, depending on strength and influence, grew in size. They absorbed other "kingdoms" typically by going to battle, and conquering their "enemy". They would then either decide to destroy its people and take over their boundaries of land, or they would absorb its infrastructure

and labour force in some ways and manage it under its own rules and regulations. The empires referred to in Daniel 2 are clear examples of these – to illustrate, there was Babylon itself, and then there was the Babylonian empire – and so on.

Having established this with kingdoms of men, what is the Kingdom of God? Simply put, it is a kingdom that has always been and will always be, as the Psalmist describes it. In relation to other kingdoms in the history of mankind, it existed before time was created. Moving from there, at the point of Creation, it merely extended itself to include Edenic earth, and after the Fall; the Flood; Babel and persistent wickedness of man, God channelled His focus to a called out people through Abraham, which eventuated in the nation of Israel, and with whom He made an everlasting covenant. It utilised people identified by the King to bear His Name to be an example of how man should live within a structure they understood and related to – a kingdom with boundaries; laws; subjects and ruler. Their existence with these parameters was to be observed by surrounding nations as an extension of a Kingdom that has always been – God’s kingdom from everlasting to everlasting.

The underlying point of this exploratory thought is – before Eden, the Kingdom of God was in existence – and eternally after Jesus has reigned on the earth, it will always exist.

### **Us and the Kingdom**

With this definition firmly established, there is one obvious point to ponder: the Kingdom of God exists right now. To be more particular, it is not a future event at all – and preaching it as such is inaccurate. It is a present, everlastingly established empire with an everlasting Monarch. It is true that at some future point in time, the Kingdom will extend itself to include the kingdoms of men and restore Eden through Jesus on this earth, but that is just a new phase of its ever present existence. Right now, its functions are firmly and very definitely being executed in all righteousness by a heavenly host of beings often alluded to in Scripture. And their King sits on His throne right now, ruling according to His Will and Purpose.

Moreover, as previously alluded to, its existence also is presently extended “beyond” heaven (from an earthly point of view) - to a people whom God has succeeded in calling out for His Name. They exist with this identity. For these people, the Kingdom is truly real and present, and their allegiance to this existence began when God extended His Kingdom to each of them. They were and are being called out. His reign is real every day of their lives. It is these people that are commanded to preach about this good news.

Are we those people, and if so, how are we conveying the Kingdom of God to mankind?

### **Do we “look forward” to the Kingdom?**

When a pleasing event is going to take place, people look forward to it happening. They wait in excitement and anticipation, and their desire is to participate. They also share their news with others, perhaps saying “I am going to this event – why don’t you also come along?” These others might also become excited and book to attend. As the day approaches, both parties would share anticipatory comments and enthusiasm, eagerly waiting for the day when the event would take place.

Do we do a similar thing with the Kingdom of God? Do we tell people of this incredible Day when God will intervene in man’s affairs and send Jesus back to this earth to sort it out? Do we “wait” for this event when Jesus come back to begin his reign?

If you do a Bible search of the word “wait” or “waiting”, there is never a positive reference to waiting for the Kingdom. Perhaps waiting for other things bear positive reference, but not the Kingdom. Here is an example found in Rom 8:23-24:

*3 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved.*

*NIV*

So indeed, there is a hope ahead to be adopted and bodies redeemed. Yet this is only part of the picture of the Kingdom of God. The last part of this quoted passage says “in this hope we were saved” – an event that has already happened. So yes, there is hope to have changes take place in the future, but what about the present – the “right here and now”?

There is only one reference found in scripture where someone was waiting for the Kingdom, and that is Joseph of Arimathea. It is worthwhile to stop and ponder the fact this is the only person referred to as “waiting for the Kingdom”. Was it good or bad to do this? He is often referred to with great fondness as being God-fearing and seeking the body of Jesus to be buried in his own tomb.

But was he right in “waiting for the kingdom”?

He actually was not. You will recall he was:

- A secretive disciple – “for fear of the Jews”
- a member of the council – a man influenced by a religious or political group who expected to have a king come and intervene in the Roman oppression. He placed himself within a structure where he could just continue existing, and yet not stand out amongst Roman rule. He was alive, yet his “real life” would happen when Rome was overthrown – like other leaders of his day.

But from what has been established, the Kingdom was very much alive at that point. He was missing the proverbial “boat”! What was more, he even had the Son of God representing God’s Kingdom in grace and truth - right there in Israel! Like those fishermen from Galilee, he should have stepped out of his former existence and walked with God by following Jesus every day.

But he was waiting for and focused on a future event. He was looking for signs. He was looking to apply prophecies to his present life and see them fulfilled as encouragement and direction. And because he looked at Jesus and saw the wrong thing in him, he was waiting for Jesus to be that person who overthrew the oppressive ruler ship of Rome. And so, as he grasped a corpse and laid it in his own tomb, Joseph really only started clinging to his King properly after he had died.

Does this sound familiar to us? Do we look for signs? Do we apply prophecies to this day and age, hoping to see them fulfilled before our eyes as encouragement and direction in our life? Does our existence dwell in a future event? Do we convey this to those with whom we preach?

What can we learn from the pre-occupations of this man?

**The Kingdom described by Jesus.**

Surely, it would be good to look at the man Jesus in a different way to Joseph. If we listen properly to him, he is emphatic at telling you what the Kingdom of God really is. In all four Gospel records, they include Jesus' description of the Kingdom – several through parables. Whether in a story or in plain language, these include expressions with a common thread – consider just a few. He says:

“the Kingdom of God (or heaven) is like...”:

- Seed sown on ground
- A mustard seed
- A field of wheat and tares
- Leaven put into bread
- For the poor
- For the pure in heart
- Difficult for a (presently) rich man to enter
- Hidden treasure to be bought with everything you have
- A pearl of great price

To look at these closely, not one of them focuses on a future time. The main body or thrust of his description is a picture of a scene or situation prior to God's intervention on earth with Christ's second coming. To illustrate:

- The word of God is sown. People respond differently, and some bear fruit now
- Wheat and tares co-exist. Leave the tares there now.
- Riches distract from being a disciple now

Each hearer of these descriptions heard what the kingdom of God was like to them in their present circumstance. It was right in the present time, applicable to their lives immediately. Jesus also clearly states a contrast with those other than his disciples living at that time. Were these people not all looking for “a messiah” - someone who would overthrow Roman oppression? But Jesus said to his disciples:

*Mark 4:11*

*11 He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.*

*NIV*

What is the secret? This passage in Mark goes on to describe the way Jesus taught – in parables – for his real followers to ponder over and apply in their lives. But it goes further than that. If we were to honestly look at Christ's message about the Kingdom of God, we could summarise it simply as:

For us, the Kingdom of God is now. It is for those who embrace Christ now. It “has been given” to his followers already.

A future fulfillment is another part of the present Kingdom, and a time when, by God's grace, we will then be married to our Groom and live as one. As with any bride, her wedding day is an exciting and hoped for event – and so it is natural to “look forward” to our Marriage Supper. Yet like a natural bride, she only looks forward to her wedding day because she knows and loves the man she is marrying. Likewise, we need consider the fact our King has made it abundantly clear he has chosen his multitudinous bride “from the foundation of the world”, and that bride is not from “a foreign land” – she is chosen because she dwells as resident in his Kingdom now, and moreover, in a present loving relationship with him.

### **A Critical Passage uttered by Jesus**

Jesus uttered something important to some very critical people. The people listening to him were religious rulers, who, like Joseph, were “missing the boat”. Their reliance on interpretation of prophetic verses in looking for their messiah, led to them being blind and insanely jealous of the real Saviour of mankind. In this blindness and pride, they put him to death. Their mindset and conduct is a grave warning to each of us. Amongst these people one day, Jesus interacted with them and this passage is recorded for our learning:

*Luke 17:20-21*

*Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, 21 nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you NIV*

To highlight, here are some important points:

- The Kingdom of God does not come with careful observation. Notice, he is speaking to the Pharisees – people who were so pre-occupied at dotting all the “I’s” and crossing all the “T’s” with scriptural details, preaching to people “like it really is”.
- Jesus goes on: he says “people” will not say “here it is” or “there it is”. What people will NOT say “here it is” or “there it is”? People who have found the Kingdom – that is who. People who have truly embraced Jesus the Christ and who follow him. By contrast, people who do say “here it is” or “there it is” have not had the Kingdom “come” to them! Jesus says it does not come that way!
- He reinforces this by saying: that “the Kingdom of God is within you”. That can only mean one thing. It is absorbed within your heart, mind and soul. It has filled up your being and is the reason for your existence.
- Think of the contrary. If you are going around saying “here it is” or “there it is”, the frightening conclusion is it is not within you! In other words, it is something external – something you may know about – and yet you do not really have within.

What is the Kingdom of God to us? As it is to us, indeed, we reflect it to others. Is it future to us? If so, it is not really in existence yet, is it – and we will find ourselves telling people “there it is”, and even pre-occupying ourselves with correcting them of future details they might have incorrectly grasped. Jesus did not do this. To describe Christ's preaching, we are told this by Peter:

*Acts 10:34-38*

34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached- 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. NIV

He went about doing good. That is how he was "telling the good news". From getting a reputation for doing good, people followed him. When people were committed to following him, he spoke to them predominantly about how to conduct their lives, and where appropriate, he touched on future events here and there.

What is our focus in preaching the Kingdom? Is it going about doing good? Or is it telling people it is "not here" yet, but it will come?

### **Some passages re-visited**

With all this background, consider some passages and phrases often read before:

- In Matt 11:12, Jesus says: *2 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing..*". This describes an existent Kingdom increasing its borders.
- The expression "the kingdom of God is near" – does not mean in time, as God's Kingdom is not confined to time. It rather means in proximity. Like other kings and kingdoms with invasions etc, this Kingdom of God is "near" dependent on how close you exist to its influence. In Mark 12, we read Jesus said to a man who was answering him wisely that he was "*not far from the Kingdom of God*". How could this be if the Kingdom is a future event?
- In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that no-one "*can see the Kingdom unless he is born again*". By inference, you can see it if you are born again. Can you see it? You should be able to, by the things you do, and by seeing others of God's Kingdom doing the same
- Romans 14 records: *17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. NIV* Everything described here is present tense – nothing future. Moreover, it is all about service.
- Matthew's record of the Gospel identifies the Kingdom as a Heavenly one now (extensive use of the expression "*the Kingdom of heaven*"); not a future one on earth. And this kingdom's values must be in our hearts now for us to be a part of it.
- Christ's bride, chosen already "*from the foundation of the world*" (Ephesians 1), who has always been in love with Christ and Christ with her, will be united together in marriage. This description is within the context of an already existing Kingdom – and, just like any other kingdom, both parties exist in this realm, awaiting the big and joyous day of marriage. Christ has vowed to abstain from the fruit of the vine until such time as he can drink it anew with his bride in this kingdom. The Lord Jesus was raised into Heaven to share His Father's throne - and sometime in the future Jesus will come back to earth to celebrate a Wedding Feast - not a Coronation.

- In John 18:36-37, Jesus said, "*My kingdom is not of this world.* (elsewhere he says "*in the world but not of it*") *If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.*" 37 "*You are a king, then!*" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "*You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*" NIV Jesus' kingdom exists now, not of this world. He is a king now. Everyone who recognises this truth "listens" to him.

### **Listening again to the words of the Lord's Prayer**

We have often said the Lord's Prayer. Its first request to God is: "*Thy Kingdom come*" - what does this really mean? As already explored in Luke, the Kingdom does not "come" with "careful observation". For those requesting this from God, it can only mean a request to have and existing Kingdom come to each of us. Right now. This way the request is very real and not some future yearning. How does this happen? To use Christ's own expression, by accepting it "within" us. It must fill our hearts with loyalty and allegiance to our King so that we represent him in every way. And yes, it will also manifest itself in a different form in the future.

This leads on to a second request, which is uttered after the first one – the sequence is important. "*Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven*". This is a request for God's influence to totally overrule what is presently predominant on earth – man's will. Those who have had the Kingdom "come" to them request to extend God's existent Kingdom to the kingdoms of this world as is promised, moving Jesus from the right hand of God to set him up in this new phase of existence and ruler ship. It is a plea for God to widen His everlasting realm to cover the earth. Moreover, Gods will is being presently done in Heaven. The important point is: God's Kingdom is a heavenly kingdom – not and earthly one. When Jesus does return to earth, the prayer reflects an extension of this heavenly realm.

The prayer then deals with present challenges: forgiveness and temptation. It then says: "*for thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen*". The kingdom is expressed as presently existing, and is linked to what was mentioned just before: forgiveness and temptation in the present tense. Forgive me and lead me not into temptation because your's is the kingdom.

### **The Kingdom now**

We need to live in the Kingdom now. Moreover, we need to be able to show people with whom we come into contact that we presently represent an everlasting Kingdom. The Kingdom must exist now within us. There is a good saying that goes like this:

"Preach the Gospel always – and if necessary, use words!"

That is what Christ did. He was the truest representative of his King by being like God despite his human-ness. He could say, only because he had first shown to all around him:

"*He who has seen me, has seen the Father*"

We need to follow. Otherwise, we have not "been born again" – we cannot see the Kingdom, because we are looking at the wrong focal point. It is present, existing, and simply going to be made manifest in a further form at a future point by the presence of Jesus Christ on earth. But he is King already. We serve the King by being like him. We are told not to represent him to others by saying "here it is" or "there it is", but by doing what he did – going about doing good - fulfilling God's will instead of our own. That is the Kingdom of God, and moreover, it has always been the

Kingdom, and will always be – God’s will being done. When Jesus comes in Glory, those who have been true to his Kingdom now will be embraced into a new phase of something already in existence – an extension of God’s holy and everlasting realm

### **Being Ambassadors of an Existing Kingdom**

Preaching the Gospel is not primarily sharing knowledge. The Pharisees focused their preaching in this way – saying how they were right and correcting everyone they thought was wrong in Biblical detail. The outcome to this is they crucified their Savior out of jealousy, because their message was overwhelmed by Christ’s testimony and representation. Real preaching, our calling, is being Jesus to others first, representing a present and existing Kingdom to which we belong. It will involve knowledge along the way, but we cannot comfort ourselves that if we tell people exactly how Jesus is going to return to earth in the future and how he is going to raise the dead, that we are preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Real preaching is reflecting an existent Kingdom, and that existence will reveal something above all else – something totally predominant - the love of God. This is because God, our King, rules that way, and after all, we are told that is why He sent His Son. Paul states this in another way – notice – all in the present tense:

*2 Cor 5:16-21*

*So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. NIV*

It is good to note that the message is one of reconciliation - not correction. Although it may involve correction as we grow together with those exposed to the Message, this is secondary to the focus of reconciliation. It is “from God”, who has reconciled us now and makes an “appeal” now – not at a future date. And He has done this because of His love for us.

### **A Testimony**

So to summarise, how should we preach the Good News? Surely as Jesus did – over anything else, showing or representing the love of God? It means being like God, as ambassadors of this love. Jesus preached this to the fullest extent by action - dying on a cross - saying: “*Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do*”. That is how he represented his King. Paul alludes to this as being the most powerful message of all time:

*1 Cor 1:23-24*

*3 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. NIV*

How did Paul preach Christ crucified? The truth is he walked into every town, bearing literal scars of his suffering in Christ’s name, yet aglow with how his life had changed having met his

Lord and King on the road to Damascus. Through the testimony of his life, he brought God's most powerful, most focused message – ongoing actions of love. The message – the Good News – was and is a supreme act of reconciliation through Christ Jesus. Paul preached it by living it. Listen to his testimony, and this is an excellent example and summary of true preaching:

*And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.*

*1 Corinthians 9:25, 27*

This is the message we should bear. It is a “*new creation*” that existed in Paul as he said those words and also has come to us already. In fact, the true message to convey is a personal testimony enacted in how we deal with those around us. Once that is revealed to others in us, we can truly say God has used us as instruments to call out a people for His Holy Name. God, our King of kings, would have then spoken through us. As with Jesus, others would then see the kingdom this way, and choose to follow.

All the rest falls into place thereafter. That is the foundation and approach in preaching the Gospel. In short, the true “Good News” is not “the kingdom of God on earth”. This is not even an expression to be found in the Bible. Rather, it is accurately told by Philip as being:

*“...the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ”, Acts 8:12*

These words encapsulate an eternal Kingdom – one that has always existed and always will. There is a vast difference between the two expressions. One message is confined to a future hope. The true message, by contrast, is a testimony – a representation – of the extent of God's Kingdom from everlasting to everlasting, which in turn, incorporates a future hope. And even this hope bears a set period of a thousand years, after which, when God is all in all, we are told in Revelation there no more temple and no sun, as everything becomes infused in a spiritual One-ness with God and His Son, existing in a vast Universe in which the earth is but a tiny speck – a universe that has always and will always be His eternal Kingdom.

## **Conclusion**

Any ambassador preaches according to what they represent. The Kingdom of God's true subjects reflect its message of reconciliation in their being, and this reconciliation is back into an eternal Kingdom that has always and will always exist. Those who accept this Way, commit to an existent King and an existent Kingdom. When they attract others by their reflective Godly presence, those exposed to their conduct will be more inclined to listen to what they have to say. This is how Jesus preached. The apostles followed this example. The Good News is actually a testimony – a proclamation of how Jesus the Christ has changed someone's life, and an invitation to follow.

This is such Good News to share.

*Mark Zeller*