

Living in the Kingdom

Revelation 1:4-8

John 18:33-37

In Revelation, Jesus is described as “The ruler of the kings of the earth”. Revelation was written to a group of persecuted Christians. It’s a bit strange that the followers of the highest king would be enduring such difficulty. In John’s gospel Pilate confronts Jesus about being a king. Jesus admits he is a king, but ironically Jesus is on trial. The ruler of all kings (including Pilate) is in the process of being condemned to crucifixion. Strange thing to happen to the highest king.

In a world where hundreds are being terrorized by attacks like we have seen in Paris and Beirut and in Nigeria, what does it mean to say Christ is King? ... A friend of mine died a few days ago. She was a runner and she had a brain tumor that resulted in one side of her body being mostly paralyzed. All she wanted to be was a mom, but she left behind two beautiful young girls in their late teens. The cancer took her. What does it mean to say Christ is King in a world like that?

Jesus gives us a bit of a clue in his response to Pilate- “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Jesus is a king, but there is a separation. The world is in some way separated from the Kingdom of Jesus.

A kingdom is where the will of the king is done. The kingdom of Christ is where his will manifests. His kingdom is where what he wants to have happen actually happens. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Thy will be done, Thy kingdom come”. Those are the same. The kingdom of God is present where His will is being done.

Each of us has a kind of kingdom. We all have a portion of our life where we can exert our will and our will is done. It might be at work, or at home, or it might even be internally in terms of what thoughts we choose to entertain. The way you have set up your living room might be an expression of your will being done. ... Our kingdoms can sometimes bump into each other. I can will for my children to clean up their toys, but sometimes that becomes a battle between two kingdoms.

To be a Christian is to learn to live in the Kingdom of God. It means learning to align your will with God's will so that God's kingdom can become a reality in your life. We learn from Jesus as his apprentices. From him we learn how to live life. To be a Christian is to learn to live as he lived, and love as he loved. As the way of Christ becomes a reality on the earth, the kingdom of God manifests on earth. Where His will is done, His kingdom has come.

The Kingdom of God is an invasion into our world. That means we are in a kind of battle. In the letter to the Ephesians we read- "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm" (Eph 6:12-13). We find ourselves in the middle of a battle. There are kingdoms at war. But we aren't fighting against human beings. Human beings are ensnared and held captive by the true enemy. They are even unwillingly used by that enemy.

When we are baptized we declare ourselves to be citizens and soldiers of the Kingdom of God. When we are baptized we are rescued from the camp of the enemy kingdom and we are made to be soldiers of God's kingdom. As a part of our baptism we reject the kingdom of evil by rejecting three sources of evil- The world, the flesh, and the devil. These are the enemies of the kingdom of God.

"The world" doesn't mean the actual earth and plants and water of creation. By "the world" we mean the system of human interactions that try to organize themselves apart from God. By "the world" we mean the systemic evil that is in our world- the systems of power that oppress and abuse. It is what causes 7 year olds in other countries to make our clothes in sweat

shops and it keeps us from knowing where our clothes are made (or from even wanting to know where our clothes are made) because we want to buy them cheaply more than we want them made justly. That system makes us afraid of refugees and keeps our hearts from reaching out to them as people that need our help. That system increases the divide between the rich and the poor. No one individual is responsible for all that. It is a system of human interactions that ignore God's direction. That is "the World".

By "the flesh" we don't mean our skin and muscle and blood. "The flesh" is the evil that comes from within us. It is our personal sin. It is our selfish choices that lead to us hurting others. It is our pride that makes us feel more important than others. It is our lust that makes us see people as things to be used for our pleasure. It is our greed that drives us for more and more and more, even if it ends up hurting others. It is our wrath that seeks to destroy another person with our anger. That is "the flesh".

By "the Devil" we mean that there is an evil force that is sneaky and invisible. It seeks to destroy creation and fight against God. It whispers into our ears and tries to manipulate and cause chaos. Supernatural evil is a saboteur. If you got rid of all the sin of individual human beings and all the sin of human social structures, there would still be evil in the universe. That is "the Devil".

At our baptism we reject the world, the flesh, and the devil, and we grasp onto Jesus as our savior and as the one who teaches us how to live. As followers of Jesus we are in a battle. The kingdom of God is invading the world. And there are forces that are fighting against it.

The way we experience that battle is usually in our choices. It is usually the choice between "Thy will" being done or "my will" being done. When someone cuts me off in traffic am I going to give the person the finger and scream at them, or am I going to choose to respond as a member of God's kingdom? When someone attacks me with gossip and rumors, will I respond by counter-attacking, or will I choose to turn the other cheek? Am I going to choose to live as a soldier of the kingdom of God with Christ as my king, or as a slave of the world the flesh and the devil. The trouble and brokenness we see in the world is as a result of kingdoms in conflict. The Kingdom of God is here, but it is developing. It isn't here fully yet. There is a battle as that kingdom spreads. That battle is often raging within each of us. Will I allow Christ to be my king? Will I allow him to guide me so that

my kingdom will be his?

If you want to know what this kingdom looks like, then read through the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). As you are reading ask yourself, “what if people really lived this way?” That is a world where the kingdom has come. That is a world where Christ is recognized as King. It is a world where our anger is not allowed to cause destruction. It is a world where lust is not allowed to destroy families and young girls are not left feeling used. It is a world where promises are kept. It is a world without revenge because people have learned to love their enemies. It is a world where the poor are helped- not so the rich can show off, but out of genuine love and compassion. It is a world where we have learned to trust God and our anxieties and fears disappear like smoke. It is a world where we are not constantly judging others. It is a world where we treat others as we would like to be treated. ... That is a glimpse of a world where Christ is king.

It will happen with or without us, but we can choose if we want to be a part of that kingdom or not. But we should keep in mind that there are no neutral parties in this. We are either part of the Kingdom of Christ, or we are part of a kingdom that is at war with it.

We should also not think of the Kingdom of God the way we think of other human kingdoms that are often marked by oppression, domination, and slavery. Jesus is a king, but he is not like other kings. Jesus says that he “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Jesus has come to teach us how to live as God intended.
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We shouldn't think that the kingdom is all up to us to make happen. In fact, we are called to give up our lives for that kingdom- to die to ourselves (Lk 9:23-25). It is often about getting out of the way and allowing Jesus to heal us and transform us. By doing that we recognize and admit that all other ways of living are slavery. The kingdom is primarily something Jesus is doing, not something we are doing. Or maybe it is better to say, it is often something he is doing in us.

Christ is King, and his kingdom is spreading and he has offered us a chance to be a part of it. In fact, by our baptism we have vowed ourselves to this kingdom. And as soldiers of his kingdom we are in a battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Someday his kingdom will be with us fully,

and everyone will recognize that, even the enemies of Christ. Jesus said to Pilate, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (18:37). May God bless us as we listen to his voice and seek to live what he says.

AMEN