

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE ON MAY 14, 2017 BY THE  
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I once attended a seminar where Bishop Howell Witt was speaking. He asked, "What is the central point in Jesus' teaching?" He asked for responses from those present as he walked up and down the aisle. "Hope." "Joy." "Peace." "Forgiveness." These were some of the responses. "No, no," he persevered, until someone said, "The kingdom of God." "Yes!" said the bishop. "The kingdom of God is central to Jesus' teaching. Hope, joy, peace and forgiveness are characteristics of it."

Jesus didn't define exactly what he meant by the kingdom of God. He said, for example, "It is like a mustard seed," "it is like yeast mixed in with the flour," "it is like treasure hidden in a field," it is like a very precious pearl," it is like a net full of all kinds of fish." (Matthew 13).

When the disciples were sent out it was "to preach the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:2) and that, in Jesus, "the kingdom of God is among you."

The terms "the kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of heaven" represent the same idea. Matthew's gospel speaks of the kingdom of *heaven*." It was written mainly for Jewish people who did not use the name "God" often because of its sacredness. Mark's gospel and Luke's gospel use the expression "the kingdom of *God*" because it was an easier expression for their non-Jewish readers to understand.

Although Jesus never defined exactly what he meant by the term when he was on trial before Pontius Pilate we see that he was careful to deny any claim to a secular dominion or to an actual territory. "<Y kingdom is not of this world," he said. (John 18:36).

The term "kingdom of God" refers to God's active reign. Perhaps the Lord's Prayer comes closest to defining the term when it links the coming of God's kingdom to the doing of God's will. "Your kingdom come; your will be done ..." Where God's will is done, there is God's kingdom.

The Old Testament writers did not write about the kingdom of God as such, but they anticipated a great day when "... the Lord of hosts will reign on Mt Zion ... and manifest his glory." (Isaiah 24:23). This would be in such a dramatic way that everyone would acknowledge God's rule. "On that day the Lord will become king over all the earth." (Zechariah 14:9). This expectation persisted into Jesus' time. Joseph or Arimathea was looking for the kingdom of God, and when John the Baptist announced, "The kingdom of God is at hand," the people surrounded him with great excitement.

Jesus began his ministry with the words, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is among you." (Mark 1:15). In him, the kingdom became a living reality. In Jesus' healings, for example, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Matthew 12:28)

But there is also a future concept, and it is clear that Jesus looked to the future for the final coming of God's rule as he taught then, and he teaches us to pray, "your kingdom come." Since the world is very far from being a place where God's will is perfectly and universally done, the consummation of the Kingdom is still in the future and is still something for which we must pray.

What will this future kingdom be like? The theologian Hans Kung wrote *it will be a kingdom where, in accordance with Jesus' prayer, God's name is truly hallowed, his will is done on earth, human beings will have everything in abundance, all sin will be forgiven and all evil overcome. It will be a kingdom where, in accordance with Jesus' promises, the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are down-trodden will finally come into their own; where pain, suffering and death will have an end.*

*It will be a kingdom that cannot be described, but only made known in metaphors: as the new covenant, the seed springing up, the ripe harvest, the great banquet, the royal feast. It will therefore be a kingdom – wholly as the prophets foretold – of absolute righteousness, of unsurpassable freedom, of dauntless love, of universal reconciliation, of everlasting peace. In this sense, therefore, it will be the time of salvation, of fulfillment, of consummation, of God's presence; the absolute future.* (Hans Kung, "On Being a Christian.")

There is the idea of growth in Jesus' parables of the kingdom, as in the mustard seed. We don't understand the mystery of growth – we can't make seeds grow. A seed grows of itself; growth comes from within the seed. The movement and growth in the kingdom is God's doing, not ours. To what extent, then, can we talk about building the kingdom? What part do we have in building it? Once when she was interviewed about her work with the poorest of the poor in India, Mother Teresa said, "I am convinced that it is he and not I; that it is his work and not my work. I am only at his disposal. Without him I can do nothing." "But," said the interviewer, "you surely have to use your initiative." "Of course," she replied, "you have to do it as if everything depends on you, but leave the rest to the Lord."

Writing in *Circles Of Love*, Henri Nouwen said that the spiritual life is a gift – the gift of the Holy Spirit who lifts us up into the kingdom of the Father's love. To say that the kingdom is a gift, however, does not mean that we wait passively until it is offered to us. Jesus told us to set our hearts on the kingdom of God, and that involves strong determination. The forces that keep pulling us back into a worry-filled life are far from easy to overcome. Here, Nouwen said, we touch the other side of discipleship, the becoming sensitive to the small, gentle voice of God. One of the hardest things in the spiritual life is listening for that voice and learning to see God in everyday happenings ... finding we can meet God not only in the big events of life, but in all events, no matter how small and apparently insignificant.

Let me give you an example of this. A group of computer salesmen, at the end of a day's sales conference, were in a rush to get home. They hurried to catch their train. As they hurried through the rail terminal, one man accidentally knocked over a stall that sold apples. Without stopping the men reached the train and boarded with sighs of relief – all but one. He said goodbye to his companions, returned to the terminal and to the turned-over stall. The person looking after the stall was a boy who was blind. The man gathered up the apples, and saw that many were bruised. He gave the boy some dollars. "Please take his money for the damage we did. I hope it hasn't spoiled your day." He started to walk away when the boy called out to him, "Are you Jesus?" The man rethought his life and what was of real value. He wondered if the blind boy without sight could see more than he could with his two food eyes. Seeing and meeting God in the events of life.

When God's will is done, there is the kingdom of God. There the ground is prepared for God's reign to extend to the hearts and wills of others. The love, the joy, the peace that people expressed in response to Bishop Witt's question, "What is the central point in Jesus' teaching?" are *characteristics* or outcomes of God's reign.

“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well.”