

## WHEN IS THE KINGDOM COMING?

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
November 30, 2003

When is the kingdom coming? In this morning's gospel lesson,<sup>i</sup> Jesus explains that the coming of the kingdom of God will be preceded by signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. On earth there will be a roaring of the sea and the waves. Then the Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and great glory. When we see all these things taking place, we'll know that the kingdom of God is near. Jesus then adds a clear statement about when the kingdom will have fully come. Looking straight into the eyes of his disciples, Jesus says: "Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."<sup>ii</sup>

The Gospel of Mark records a similar statement by Jesus. Speaking to a crowd, as well as his disciples, Jesus says: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power."<sup>iii</sup> This is a message that Jesus preached from the beginning of his ministry. Mark reports that after the arrest of John the Baptist, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'<sup>iv</sup>

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, examined these statements in his capacity as a biblical scholar and author of a now classic work published in 1906, The Quest of the Historical Jesus<sup>v</sup>. There Schweitzer used these passages to demonstrate how Jesus the man, the historical Jesus, was

capable of simply being wrong. The kingdom of God did not come in all its glory before Jesus' generation had passed away. It still hasn't come.

In fact, this caused some serious problems for the early church. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians around the year 50, seems to be saying that Jesus would return to earth while people of his generation were still alive.<sup>vi</sup> So also the author of Revelation, writing near the end of the first century, claimed that the climatic battle of Armageddon and the establishment a new heaven and a new earth "must take place soon...for the time is near."<sup>vii</sup> Yet, the Second Letter of Peter, which is seen by many scholars as the latest document in the New Testament, perhaps written as late as 150 A.D., acknowledges that Jesus had not yet come back to earth and that this could make the church look bad. The letter affirms that "Scoffers will come...saying 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'"<sup>viii</sup> This biblical author has an explanation, though: "Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."<sup>ix</sup>

Of course, the expectation of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God has continued throughout the two thousand year history of the church. Church fathers like Tertullian argued for the end being near in the early 200's. The belief became particularly intense at the close of the first millennium in 1,000 A.D., again at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's, and then during the 1800's among a number of Protestant movements.<sup>x</sup> Even in our own time, many thought the kingdom would come with the turn of this new millennium. The expectation has

continued since in apocalyptic visions held not only by certain clergy but by lots of lay people, including some prominent politicians. According to a recent survey in U.S. News and World Report, one third of Americans think the kingdom will be coming soon.<sup>xi</sup>

So what are people like me to do -- those of us who are not convinced of an apocalypse now? How are we to make sense of the words of Jesus in today's gospel lesson? And what do we mean when we pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (or in the translation of the original Greek that we use here in Memorial Church -- "Your reign come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven")?

I think the key may be found in all the biblical passages where Jesus compares the coming of the kingdom to growth of a plant from a seed.<sup>xii</sup> Earlier in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is quoted as saying: "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree."<sup>xiii</sup> In Mark, Jesus explains that "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, and he does not know how. The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."<sup>xiv</sup> The imagery is complicated a bit in the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus asserts that "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well."<sup>xv</sup>

For me, the seed metaphor is useful because it implies that the spirit of God is already present, working in the world, but that it's not yet fully manifest. Jesus is the harbinger, the seed

of divine presence that has been sown with his incarnational life here on earth. It's our job to water and nourish the seed that is among us and within us, to help it grow to full glory. There are also weeds among the wheat which need to be attended to and removed. Ultimately, though, as with the life force manifest in growing plants, we really don't know how seeds sprout and grow, and we aren't finally in control. Mother Nature is. Biblically speaking, we've been called to be good stewards of God's creation, perhaps even co-creators with God, yet in the final analysis things are in God's hands, not ours. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in your time, O God, not in ours.

There's a proclamation that confirms this understanding for me some four chapters earlier in the book of Luke than today's gospel lesson. It seems to bring us 180 degrees from the notion of signs imminently appearing in the sun, moon, stars and seas, and the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory. Earlier in Luke's account Jesus is asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God is coming. He replies, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."<sup>xvi</sup> The Quakers say that "there is that of God in everyone."<sup>xvii</sup> The notion that the Holy Spirit of the divine is both deep within us and among us, longing to grow, is a powerful incentive not only toward respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person but also toward furthering the goal of world community, with peace liberty and justice for all.<sup>xviii</sup> This seed imagery is the link for me between the personal and social imagery in today's gospel lesson. We are called personally to be alert and not weighed down, in the words of Jesus, with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life -- instead living as if the full kingdom of

God, in all of its social implications, is just around the corner. Jesus explicitly references the seed imagery within today's lesson when he speaks in a parable of the fig tree and other trees as not yet having sprouted leaves; yet, when they do, we will know that summer is near.

Recognizing that the kingdom of God is somehow accessible within each of us, and living with an active expectation of its social fulfillment throughout the whole world, keeps us awake, alert and alive as committed members of the human community. It encourages us to take care of our own spiritual lives as well as to reach out to others in need. There's a strong ethic required when we're living in the knowledge that the kingdom has already come inwardly in fledgling, seedling form in our hearts, and outwardly in Jesus' divine incarnation on earth some 2000 years ago, but has not yet come in all its glory either within us or in the world.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us some of what it means to live within God's kingdom in seedling form: "Do not resist an evildoer...If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...Give to everyone who begs from you...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you...Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...Do not judge, so that you may not be judged...In everything do unto others as you would have them do unto you."<sup>xix</sup> Jesus does not give these instructions for a pre-kingdom world, but for this world now, where the kingdom of God is already breaking into hearts and minds.

As for the end time, Judgment Day, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, Jesus instructs his followers that those who will inherit the kingdom prepared

from the foundation of the world are those who have been socially engaged and socially committed -- engaged and committed in feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoners.

Living consciously in expectation of the kingdom is especially appropriate at this time of year, as we enter the Christian season of Advent. We sing "O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel."<sup>xx</sup> We read from the prophet Jeremiah, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the House of Israel."<sup>xxi</sup> We await the birthday of Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, who brings with him a vision of the kingdom of God now present among us and within us in seeding form, and who inspires us to act in very specific ways, as if the full coming of the kingdom were just around the corner.

When is the kingdom coming? The kingdom has come, and the kingdom is always coming.<sup>xxii</sup> If you don't understand, look at the fig tree and all the trees. There are wonders there, and wonders still the world shall witness.

## NOTES

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- i. Luke 21: 25-36.
  - ii. Luke 21: 32.
  - iii. Mark 9:1.
  - iv. Mark 1:15.
  - v. Currently available as Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus (New York: Macmillan, 1968).
  - vi. See 1 Thessalonians 4: 14-17 and Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 190-191.
  - vii. Revelation 1: 1,3; Borg and Wright, The Meaning of Jesus, p. 191.
  - viii. 2 Peter 3: 3-4.
  - ix. 2 Peter 3: 8-9.
  - x. Borg and Wright, The Meaning of Jesus, p. 189.
  - xi. As cited in Reginald Stackhouse, The End of the World? A New Look at an Old Belief (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).
  - xii. See the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p. 23.
  - xiii. Luke 13: 18-19.
  - xiv. Mark 4: 26-28.
  - xv. Matthew 13: 24-26.
  - xvi. Luke 17: 20-21.
  - xvii. George Fox, as quoted by the Philadelphia Society of Friends Yearly Meeting at [www.pym.org](http://www.pym.org).
  - xviii. See, for this language, the purposes and principles of the Unitarian Universalist

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Association, adopted as a bylaw by the 1984 and 1985 General Assemblies.

xix. Matthew 5: 39,42,44; 6: 14,19,21; 7: 1,12.

xx. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," is a thirteenth century hymn translated by John Mason Neale in the 1850's from the version in the Psalteriolum Cantionum Catholicarum of 1710.

xxi. Jeremiah 33:14.

xxii. See, for a fuller explanation of this paradox, the Interpreter's Dictionary, p. 23.