

for the full-orbed mission of the church. To pursue this further, we need to look at the larger picture within which all this makes sense: the kingdom of God.

(Lesson 5 Easter)

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We have seen at several points in this book that the normal Christian understanding of kingdom, especially of kingdom of heaven, is simply mistaken. "God's kingdom" and "kingdom of heaven" mean the same thing: the sovereign rule of God (that is, the rule of heaven, of the one who lives in heaven), which according to Jesus was and is breaking in to the present world, to earth. That is what Jesus taught us to pray for. We have no right to omit that clause from the Lord's Prayer or to suppose that it doesn't really mean what it says.

This, as we have seen, is what the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit are all about. They are designed not to take us away from this earth but rather to make us agents of the transformation of this earth, anticipating the day when, as we are promised, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." When the risen Jesus appears to his followers at the end of Matthew's gospel, he declares that all authority in heaven *and on earth* has been given to him. When John the Seer hears the thundering voices in heaven, they are singing, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign for ever and ever."¹³ And the point of the gospels—of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together with Acts—is that *this has already begun*.

The question of *how* it has begun—in what sense it is inaugurated, anticipated, or whatever—has been the stuff of debate for a long time. But part of the problem with that debate is that those taking part in it do not usually clarify the question of *what precisely it is* that is begun, launched, or initiated. At one level it is clearly the hope of Israel, as expressed in classic kingdom passages such as

Isaiah 52:7–12. There, “God becoming king at last” means the end of exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of Israel’s God to Zion. We can see all of that becoming the major theme not only of Jesus’s life and public career but also of his own interpretation of his death.¹⁴

But underneath that again, when we stand back, is the meaning of God’s kingdom, to which the hope of Israel was designed to contribute—or, to put it another way, the meaning because of which God called Israel in the first place. Faced with his beautiful and powerful creation in rebellion, God longed to set it right, to rescue it from continuing corruption and impending chaos and to bring it back into order and fruitfulness. God longed, in other words, to re-establish his wise sovereignty over the whole creation, which would mean a great act of healing and rescue. He did not want to rescue humans *from* creation any more than he wanted to rescue Israel *from* the Gentiles. He wanted to rescue Israel *in order that Israel might be a light to the Gentiles*, and he wanted thereby to rescue humans *in order that humans might be his rescuing stewards over creation*. That is the inner dynamic of the kingdom of God.

That, in other words, is how the God who made humans to be his stewards over creation and who called Israel to be the light of the world is to become king, in accordance with his original intention in creation, on the one hand, and his original intention in the covenant, on the other. To snatch saved souls away to a disembodied heaven would destroy the whole point. God is to become king of the whole world at last. And he will do this not by declaring that the inner dynamic of creation (that it be ruled by humans) was a mistake, nor by declaring that the inner dynamic of his covenant (that Israel would be the means of saving the nations) was a failure, but rather by fulfilling them both. That is more or less what Paul’s letter to the Romans is all about.¹⁵

This is the purpose that has been realized in Jesus Christ. One of the greatest problems of the Western church, ever since the Reformation at least, is that it hasn’t really known what the gospels were there for. Imagining that the point of Christianity was to enable

people to go to heaven, most Western Christians supposed that the mechanism by which this happened was the one they found in the writings of Paul (I stress, the one *they found*; I have argued elsewhere that this involved misunderstanding Paul as well) and that the four gospels were simply there to give backup information about Jesus, his teaching, his moral example, and his atoning death. This long tradition screened out the possibility that when Jesus spoke of God's kingdom, he was talking not about a heaven for which he was preparing his followers but about something that was happening in and on this earth, through his work, then through his death and resurrection, and then through the Spirit-led work to which they would be called.

Part of the difficulty people still have in coming to terms with the gospels, read in this way, is that *kingdom of God* has been a flag of convenience under which all sorts of ships have sailed. Some used the phrase as a cover for pursuing business of their own—programs of moral, social, or political improvement or upheaval, agendas of the left and the right, of the well-meaning but muddled and of the less well-meaning but all too clear. Many who went this route treated the gospels as though they were simply stories about Jesus going around helping people as best he could, with the unfortunate sequel of his untimely death. And many other Christians, seeing this shallow and confused exegesis and application, reacted angrily against what is called kingdom theology as though it were simply an outdated and shallow corporate version of faddish self-help moralism. (This is a serious problem in some parts of America, where *kingdom* has become a slogan of this kind and has then been used to rule out or marginalize many aspects of orthodox Christian faith—precipitating among some would-be orthodox Christians a reaction against any social or political dimension to the gospel and against kingdom language altogether. By such means do we project our own confusions onto the text.)

But the fact that some people, and some movements, have misappropriated the kingdom theology of the gospels doesn't mean

there isn't a reality of which such ideas are a caricature. What we find in the gospels is much, much more profound. Here we meet again a familiar problem, the problem of how Jesus's initial ministry joins up with his self-giving to death. I have argued at length elsewhere that Jesus never imagined that the kingdom he was launching through his healings, feastings, and teachings would be fulfilled without his death. Or, to put it the other way around, I and others have stressed that Jesus's death was not (and he did not think it was) about something other than the kingdom work to which he had devoted his short public career. The problem of evil, which looms up as the backdrop to the gospels, is not going to be dealt with even by Jesus's healings, feastings, and teachings. It certainly won't be dealt with by his then providing his followers with a fast-track route to a distant and disembodied heaven. It can only be dealt with—the kingdom can only come on earth as in heaven—through Jesus's own death and resurrection. That is a whole other story, though of course a central and vital one.¹⁶

But when we reintegrate what should never have been separated—the kingdom-inaugurating public work of Jesus and his redemptive death and resurrection—we find that the gospels tell a different story. It isn't just a story of some splendid and exciting social work with an unhappy conclusion. Nor is it just a story of an atoning death with an extended introduction. It is something much bigger than the sum of those two diminished perspectives. It is the story of God's kingdom being launched on earth as in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched, and Jesus's followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory and that inaugurated new world into practice. Atonement, redemption, and salvation are what happen on the way because engaging in this work demands that people themselves be rescued from the powers that enslave the world in order that they can in turn be rescuers. To put it another way, if you want to help inaugurate God's kingdom, you must follow in the way of the cross, and if

you want to benefit from Jesus's saving death, you must become part of his kingdom project. There is only one Jesus, only one gospel story, albeit told in four kaleidoscopic patterns.¹⁷

Heaven's rule, God's rule, is thus to be put into practice in the world, resulting in salvation in both the present and the future, a salvation that is both *for* humans and, *through* saved humans, for the wider world. This is the solid basis for the mission of the church. But to explore this further will need another chapter.