

19 The Kingdom and its Works

To believe in Jesus the Messiah is to enter gladly into the kingdom where God rules, where we live not as our fears and needs drive us, not as our society and its economy command us, not even out of compulsion under religious laws, but in the freedom that God has given us as God's children. There, in the wide domain of God's rule, our lives will be governed no longer by the desperate need to provide for ourselves or to maintain our own worth against those who mite try to take it away:

Don't you know that two-a-penny sparrows have their value in your Father's sight, and you are worth far more than sparrows! (Matt 10: 29 – 31)

For God has embraced us, and the rule of the Messiah that has dawned upon us is not a constraint – not even a benevolent constraint – but a glad liberation, a door opened for us to pass thru, to enter into the paradise of the liberty of those who may call God their Father. Our desires are to have no limits, and it will be our glory to ask for all that we desire:

Ask and it will be given to you; go looking for it and you will find the kingdom; knock and the door will be opened for you. (Matt 7: 7 – 8)

In the kingdom of God we will dare to imagine a world transformed, a revolution of giving and sharing that sweeps away the sadness of greed and the madness of pride. It is the world of God's own desiring, and as children of God we may desire it too. We are told to desire it, not timidly or provisionally, but with ardent and persistent passion, desiring what no one but God has the right to desire: the perfect world where God's rule has triumphed.

Blessed are those who crave justice, hungering and thirsting for it, for they shall eat and drink their fill. (Matt 5:6)

The seed of it has been planted within us, and drives upward already with the lively desire of the shooting plant for light, air, and life fulfilled.

As children of God, we pray. Whatever is the measure of our hope, the height and depth of our desire for the kingdom of God, we ask God to fulfill it. Since we are children of God, our desire will be like God's and our asking will not be for our own narrow comforts and narrower visions, but for the whole fulfillment of God's desire: for justice in the world, for the rich peace and security of God's children in every country and in every community, for the health of the world that is our home and the place of God's kingdom; and for every work, every change, every achievement, from the least to the greatest, that lies on the road to that goal.

We will pray, and the kingdom of God will come about even as we ask for it, and because we believe this and trust God implicitly, we do not wait to see the answer before we begin to live in the will of God, in the ways of the kingdom God is giving us. Already, even as we ask, we begin to do the works of the kingdom, believing that the kingdom is our sphere of action, already given to us by God.

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Prayer is not a passive leaving of responsibility to God; rather it is the first step in our action. If the desire is real enuf and strong enuf to go to God for an answer, it will also be real enuf for action, and God's answer will come with the action God inspires in us. It's never a matter of dividing up our responsibility and God's, prayer and action, faith and works. In the kingdom of God, these are not separate compartments, distinct spheres of activity, but one harmonious, continuous, integrated whole.

God's desire, the desire and teaching of the Messiah, our desiring, asking and action are all of a piece: the work of God who wins our trust so that God works with us and we work with God. This is the kingdom and sovereignty of God. It is beauty and vigorous peace, a being-together and a doing-together in which faith and works, prayer and action, freedom and obedience, life and sacrifice, sacred and secular are at one, the wholeness of history redeemed in a movement initiated of God, and thru God's Messiah reflected in the children of God.

The kingdom of God is the perfect fulfillment of God's Law, not in meticulous observance but in love of God and love of one another. That Law of God is no longer what we must do, but what we can do, may do, have God's permission and empowerment to do, for the Messiah has declared the ultimate standards of God, to which we would never have dared, but can now with confidence aspire. God rules by opening up before us the huge new possibilities of a life like God's. Morality is no longer limited to the justice of the law, even for us who never succeeded in attaining that justice. "You are to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

We believe, but we believe neither in a kingdom visibly accomplished, which would not be faith at all, nor in a kingdom that simply exists in another world, which, frankly, would not be a very challenging faith. We believe in a kingdom that comes and so changes this world, the rule of God already here in seed – and more than seed, because the seed is already growing. We believe, in fact, that what is final and definitive, finally and definitively good because it is the definitive will of God, has already begun; and that it is here for us to take hold of, to be part of, that it has taken hold of us and taken root in our world where it will grow until it is totally and everywhere accomplished.

We do not delude ourselves that a perfect order has been accomplished, or that something like it sits comfortably side by side with the evils of wealth and power. But neither do we give up on that perfect order, as something that is only for a future beyond our time. For it is here, real enuf and close enuf to engage us and change our present ways of living. Godself moves us to recognize it. "Blessed are you, Simon Jonasson, for this is no human insight, but a revelation to you from my Father in heaven."

It's not that the rule of God lifts us into some blessed realm of contemplation where we no longer see the world as it is. We see clearly what the world is, and we feel it, struggling with it to change it into something more like the kingdom of God. We see the intimidating demands of money, the blackmail of status and the threats of power, and seeing thru them we understand our world all the better. It's not that we have a blueprint of the future, or that we know what will be what and where as the kingdom of God is realized among us. It will be many things we know about. It will be the

crop that returns a hundredfold, the generous measure of grain, pressed down, shaken together, overflowing; it will be the making of peace, the honesty of vision, the giving of comfort, the bearing of bitter hostility and persecution ... But it won't be the neat fulfillment of a draft constitution already written up in our minds.

It's not that we know, but that we believe. And believing, we will see thru the suffocating illusions that now claim to be reality just because they control. When we're told that the existing economic system is the only possible one (short of Christ's coming) that greed and self-interest have to be the driving conditions of human enterprise, that war is inevitable and that power lies with the gun and the bomb, we will see thru the impenetrable lie, not to another complete system redy to replace it, but to mere glimpses and catches of a new order, no more than a flash of light and suggestive hope, (about as much as a bit of yeast buried in the stolid mass of dough or a pinch of salt dropped into the whole pot); but because we know that the Messiah has already come and that he gives us those glimpses, they are enuf to lift us, expose us and move us, and to date the whole doomed and creaking structure that opposes us as the practical realism of our world.

Our claim that Jesus is the Messiah – that we rightly call him Christ – depends on Jesus' assurance that “the kingdom of God has come upon you.”¹ There are other views: that the kingdom of God is far away, in heven; that the rule of God will come in the future, at the end of time. But Jesus' teaching is that the kingdom of God is among us now. That is, the complete and definitive intervention of God has taken place. Everything that is really power – God's power – is already committed and available to us. Nothing has been held back, waiting for a more suitable time, for the kingdom's time has come.

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It involves a radical change, a revolution in our hearts and in all our ways, and the Messiah begins his work in, not after, this process of change. He has realized, as God in God's compassion has seen, that only the Messiah and the rule of the Messiah can adequately prepare us for the rule of the Messiah. In the kingdom of God as it is now among us, the weeds may continue to grow, for they are rooted in our own hearts, in our old ways and our old society and nations. But the Messiah himself is at work among us, to change our ignorance, greed and fear until they are at an end and the kingdom of God has outlasted all the weeds.

The very real problem that Pinchas Lapide so clearly enunciated is answered only by a profound understanding of repentance: that the deep change in our hearts and in our society, necessary if we are to welcome the rule of the Messiah, if we are not to be judged and perish in it, can only be accomplished by the Messiah. The rule of God begins in a people and a world unfit, and the Messiah himself gives himself to us, to make us fit. The reign of the Messiah is launched not among a people who are redy to accept it, but among a people who are learning to accept it – and learning still in many different ways, at many different stages.

¹ Matt 12: 28

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To believe in Jesus the Messiah is to accept whole-heartedly his program of repentance, to live in his work of changing our hearts, our societies and our world. It is neither waiting for the kingdom still to come, nor deluding ourselves that because it has come nothing more needs to be changed. In the way that the kingdom of God has come, everything still needs to be changed. A total and radical revolution is called for, until our hearts, our communities, our nations and our world fulfill the manifesto of Jesus the Messiah.

But because it is the kingdom of God and the rule of the Messiah, even now while the revolution is still to be accomplished, while everything is still to be changed, and we are still learning and struggling to learn, the promise of that manifesto is being achieved. The energy and authority of the Messiah, the true power of God, is with us and is bringing it about. Once we have understood the deep necessity of our repentance, we are not to sink into it helplessly, but to understand that the Messiah himself takes it in hand to carry it thru in us. The power and the glory of the kingdom do not have to wait until the learning has been done and the changes are all achieved. We are to look up, to discover and see in all the places where it is happening, the good work of God, the seed growing, the signs of his manifesto being fulfilled.

In this world which we see with wide open eyes, in all its injustice, cruelty and tragedy, where we see clearly the evil not only of our enemies but of our best friends, of the nations we are proud to belong to and of the corporations that feed us and pay us, where the weeds grow thick and strong and put their roots down into our own hearts, even here there are signs of the perfect will of God already opening up among us. Already we are invited to welcome the beginnings of the kingdom and to run with those beginnings, with the movements and forces of justice and change, to commit ourselves with them until all the work of God is done.

We are challenged to look out on the world and see the love, the doing of God's will, the commitment, the vision and the solidarity, the struggles and the triumphs of justice, that are themselves the beginnings of God's rule established here. We will see people speaking out, teaching, demonstrating and working for peace, for justice in trade and territory, for freedom, respect and law, for the good things of the world to be preserved and shared, for integrity, for wholeness and holiness. We will see friendship and service, and the timely offer of forgiveness. We will see healing and commitment and love. And seeing them, we will be challenged to identify with them, to give them our energy and our time, because they are, however slight and tentative, the beginnings of what we desire and pray for: the coming of God's kingdom. In the dreadful meeting with evil we will nonetheless discover God delivering us from evil, as we ask. We will find God instigating in others around us the simplicity, the humility, the compassion, the honesty, that meets and overcomes evil; people driving at justice with an absolute hunger for it, enduring with powerful hope the worst that evil can inflict, and steadfastly seeking the peace that is God's blessing on the world. We will meet the children of God.

And because they are God's children their victory is assured. Tho they hardly know who they serve and what they are doing, because they are only beginners and learners, tho they are resisted and put to death, tho evil seems to triumph again and again, Godself is giving them the life and the energy that will reshape the world into the

beauty of the Law of God, the smallest dot and versicle of which will be fulfilled.¹ Power, in the familiar sense, which opposes the will of God, can and will do its worst, and its worst is that it can kill. And the worst of its killing is that it can kill the Messiah, on whom depends the rule of God among us. And that is the worst it can do – already done, and annulled by the resurrection morning on which God's work is begun.

We are not to be afraid, therefore.² We will face determined opposition, betrayal and disgrace if we follow Jesus, serving the kingdom of God. As the world treated the Messiah it will treat his followers, for we will be making public the whole challenge of his teaching, everything the world would rather we kept wrapped up safely in our churches and our bibles, every dangerous and disturbing idea, every demand of the kingdom for justice, integrity, love. The little whispers we hear in our fellowships, in quietly out-of-the-way and sympathetic groups, where the world is content for little things to be whispered and enjoyed by those who choose to believe them, we will take shouting to the rooftops, in daylight declaring and proclaiming in public, where they are unwelcome, offensive, ridiculous, subversive, traitorous – where they will be punished by the full weight and authority of public power. But we are not to be afraid, even of losing our lives. It might happen, but if it does, we will have won our life.

We are not to be ashamed of the teaching of Jesus, but to speak it out and live it out boldly in the face of a world which tells us again and again that Jesus is not the Messiah, that his teachings are too idealistic, that human nature cannot aspire so high, that the powerful forces of government and greed, beyond the control of individual and minor players, cannot be subject to his rules, that our only practical and realistic option is to accept that other forces control human history, and to leave ourselves a private space and hope of salvation somewhere else. The world will try to make us blush for the teachings of Jesus, to abandon or explain away or spiritualise the manifesto, as if of course the kingdom of heaven cannot come; as if of course it's futile to hope that God's will would be carried out on earth, where other wills inevitably triumph.

But we are not to be frightened or shamed out of believing in him:

Don't you know that two-a-penny sparrows have their value in your Father's sight, and you are worth far more than sparrows! (Matt 10: 29)

In the end, and in the presence of God where it counts, Jesus himself will acknowledge those who believe in him, who have not been put off or frightened off or talked out of the kingdom.

Everyone who declares their faith in me in face of the world, I will declare for them in the presence of my Father in heaven. (Matt 10: 32)

He will stand by those who have been faithful, not because they have succeeded in changing the world (they might not have succeeded) but because they have gone on believing, and showing their belief, in him. In the presence of God, what counts is our faith, that has not been shamed out of doing the will of God.

¹ Matt 5:18 ² See Matt 10: 26 - 33

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History, in which the work of the kingdom is carried out, does not go on forever, the mercy of God enduring forever but never achieving its goal. Jesus taught that there is an end to come, an end and a judgement in which it will be abundantly clear where we have been, what we have done and how we stand in the kingdom of God. The end and the coming of judgement are not themselves the kingdom of God, but they are like the kingdom of God, for they are in fact the point at which we will look back on the whole history of God's kingdom among us, and will know, as something now done and for all to see, how the rule of God has found us and what it has made of us.

Jesus tells of the coming of the Son of Man in a parable which Matthew reports as Jesus' last word before he faces the events of his passion.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels accompany him, he will sit on his own glorious throne and all the nations will be gathered there before him. He will divide them into two groups, as a shepherd divides his sheep from his goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.

Then he will say to the ones on his right: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Receive your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food to eat; I was thirsty and you brought me water; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; you covered me when I had no clothes; you visited me when I was sick, and you came to me in prison."
(Matt 25: 31 – 36)

If ever we needed a clear teaching that the works we do are decisive for final salvation, it is here for us. Those who are welcomed into the kingdom of God, when it is complete, are those who have done the works of Jesus, whose loving service has found its way to bring practical help to those who need it. When the people so judged reply

"Lord, when did we see you in such need and come to your aid?" he will say to them, "I tell you, whenever you came to the help of the least one among my brothers you came to my help."
(Matt 25: 40)

In the end, it is what we do for others that counts. And what we do not do is the counter-judgment. Those who did not feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, medicine and comfort to the sick, or care and concern to prisoners, are rejected from the kingdom when at last it is complete.

Of course the parable of the sheep and the goats doesn't give us a choreographed rehearsal of the final judgment. But it tells us what that judgment will be like and how we will figure in it: it sheds a light that will be only too clear when the work is done and the end is come and God's uttermost beginning is open, and all who have responded to him are taking it. It tells us enuf about God's final judgment to reshape and redirect our lives as of now.

When Jesus speaks of standing by his disciples in the very presence of God, it was judgment according to faith, whether we have faithfully and steadfastly believed in Jesus. The parable of the sheep and goats is judgment according to works. In both accounts the reward of righteousness, the result for those who meet the test of Christ, is their place in the finally triumphant kingdom of God. They are affirmed and acknowledged by the Messiah; they are welcomed as the owners of the kingdom. For steadfast faith in Jesus the Messiah we will be acknowledged in the presence of God; for the good works done we will receive God's kingdom.

It is clear in Matthew's gospel that Jesus did not separate faith and works the way some of our historic arguments have done. It is impossible that anyone should acknowledge him in faith without doing the works he commands. They will certainly do them – even if as learners they often fail to do them well – and in doing them, in trying to learn how to do them better, in living to learn how to do them better, they will learn what it really means to believe in him. If we believe, we will obey him and we will want to show others how to obey him. If we do not obey him, if we think it's not possible to live that kind of life here or yet, it's because we do not believe: for us, he is not really the Messiah, the power of God is not in him, and he is not with us after all.

In the gospel according to Matthew, there is no problem about faith and works. Only in the power of God, which faith receives, can we do the works of Jesus; and there is no faith in him which does not do his works. The question is whether we recognise that Jesus is the Messiah, and if we do, we will not sit down to expound doctrines or close our eyes to affirm our belief in them. We will get up to change the world, knowing that the world is not yet as it can and must be under the rule of God. If we believe, we will be up and doing, and our doing will be visible enuf, loving enuf, challenging and even shocking enuf, to change the world, even if, in the process, the world kills us as it killed the Messiah.

But there is another important dimension to the parable of the sheep and the goats. When Jesus speaks of the Son of Man judging the nations he is taking up a phrase used by the prophets before him, for whom the "nations" were the gentiles, the foreigners who did not know Israel's God. The prophet Hosea, for instance, had poured scorn on Israel for relying on the "nations", for putting her trust in foreign alliances¹ and he foresaw her punishment as exile "among the nations". Jeremiah declaimed judgement "against the nations" in a series of oracles.² Obadiah cried out against the treachery of Edom and threatened them with the judgement day of Yahweh which is for "all the nations".³ And the prophet Joel spoke most vividly of God's judgement on the nations (who are definitely not Israel and Judah):

When the day comes and I restore the fortunes of Judah, I will summon all the nations and gather them in the valley of Jehosaphat. There I will pass judgement upon them in the case of my people Israel, for they have scattered them among the nations and divided up my land. (Joel 3:1 – 2)

¹ Hos 7: 8 – 9; 8: 8, 10 ² Jer chapters 46 – 51 ³ Ob verse 15

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And when the psalms speak of a coming judgement upon the nations:

Yahweh has set up his throne, and will judge the peoples with justice ...
... the nations have fallen into their own pit, caught in their own trap.
(Psalm 9: 7,8,15)

they are signaling the day to come when God will intervene decisively on behalf of his people and bring to a reckoning the many nations who, by Israel's reckoning, have been their oppressors.¹

The word we translate "nations" almost always in the Christian scriptures – and especially in Matthew – means the "gentiles", the nations outside of Israel. When Jesus describes the judgment upon the "nations", the outsiders, his reference is primarily not to Israel or his disciples, but to the nations beyond Israel, who do not know God and do not know of the Son of Man as Israel does, who in the final judgment will have their assessment from God. Those who are welcomed as heirs of the kingdom do not even know that the glorious Son of Man was to be met in the hungry, thirsty, distressed, weak or imprisoned.

Of course, the story is a parable and we should not try to squeeze meaning out of the details of a parable as if they were allegories. In parables the message is not in the details, but in the main point or thrust of the story – often declared in the punchline. But here the punchline, the "surprise" of the story is the unexpected declaration to people (the sheep) from among the gentiles (the nations) that they have inherited the kingdom of God.

The good and the wicked who are judged in the story do not know why they are so judged – until it is explained to them. The parable simply doesn't work if applied to the disciples of Jesus (tho it may be very useful for reminding them of their duties as disciples). It is a description of the final judgement of God as it comes upon those, the "nations" or gentiles, who in this life have not known him or met his Messiah, their final rejection as wicked or their welcome into the kingdom. It simply doesn't make sense if Jesus is talking about his disciples and those of whom they will make disciples, who will know that they are to see him and serve him in others. They will all, of course, be subject to the same judgement, but the parable is describing it as it affects the uninstructed gentiles.

Whatever it may teach us about living our lives for the needy, this is primarily a parable of God's decision about the righteous gentiles, those who, not knowing God, lead good lives. It shows what will count as good with God, the relationship it establishes with the Son of Man, and how it leads to the kingdom of God. Those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked and befriend prisoners, have entered, even without knowing it, into a binding relationship with the Son of Man and the Son of Man when he comes in judgment will acknowledge them, just as Jesus promises acknowledgment for those disciples who have not given up on him.

¹ cf Psalms 79; 110: 5-6; 149

It is not that certain good deeds are enough to get you into heaven, or to earn salvation. None of us, by any of our deeds, can save ourselves, but God saves us, and the deed is done by Jesus the Messiah, the Son of Man, when he, out of God's free and self-committing love, identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the friendless, the prisoners, in such a way that what we do for them is done for him and places us firmly in a relationship with him, which he will honor.

Tho there is great value in good done for others, it becomes saving value, a commitment extending beyond the sphere of our competence into God's acceptance, only thru the goodness of God, whose identification with the weak in our world and its history makes our work for them a work for God, a work that God values eternally.

This idea is sometimes criticised as devaluing people in themselves, treating them as if they only had value thru association with God. Now it seems to me that it's no devaluation at all, to be valued as one with whom God identifies, but we can let that pass as far as this story is concerned. For here the criticism fails to notice that the ones pronounced blessed are precisely those who do not know they are serving God, or serving God's Messiah. They are the ones who do value others in themselves – and truly themselves. They value the unlovely who cannot do anything for them, the poor, the outcast, the convicted prisoners. They are the ones who, without knowing God or his Messiah, nonetheless recognise an imperative value in the hungry, the weak, the disadvantaged, such that they respond to them and serve them, meeting their needs.

Paradoxically, it's precisely because they don't know, that we can see a similarity between their conviction and the conviction of faith. As with the faith of disciples, who acknowledge Jesus the Messiah in the face of discouragement and persecution, they are steadfastly affirming the values of God, which move them not as abstract principles or ideologies but as living and needy human beings. They believe, and believe to the point of action, in the one revelation God has given them: the value of God's children, the Messiah's sisters and brothers.

Such "faith" will have been severely tested. They will have found that they can only affirm the value of the other in the face of every indication and persuasion to the contrary. For anyone who truly serves the poor, the weak, the criticised, the marginalized, soon loses any illusion that the poor are automatically nice, or the oppressed engagingly innocent. If that's their presupposition for serving the needy, they will soon give up. A little bit of real contact soon disabuses you about the poor and cures you of any illusions you may have had about your own virtue and altruism. For the poor and the hungry, the excluded and the weak, are just as much a mixture of ugly and troublesome characters as any other group of people, and they bring out both ugly and troublesome reactions in yourself. By putting the emphasis simply on the fact that they were needy and not on any other appeal they mite make to our sympathy, Jesus is pointing to a fundamental recognition of their value in themselves – which is a value both given and recognised by God and wholeheartedly acknowledged by the Messiah. When the uninstructed pagan recognises this value and acts upon it, even without knowing God, they will find themself at one with God and with God's Messiah.

Among Christians, there are those who, out of misguided loyalty to the gospel, want to limit the reach of God to the range of the Christian evangelist's voice. As if the

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disciple's task is to enable God, and not to teach the nations – as if it is our role to save, rather than to spread the good news about salvation. We do not bring the Messiah, just as the Messiah does not bring God. It is God alone who saves, and invites whom he chooses to inherit God's kingdom, and in the parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus is telling us whom God chooses.

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Who are the people of the kingdom of God, the blessed ones who will finally inherit it in all its glory? They are not, in the end, any of those who may bring forward their qualifications as a claim, not even those who might bring forward their faith. Rather, they are those whom, in the end, the Son of Man acknowledges. He will recognise and he will decide, and when he does we will find that his decision has been woven into the very fabric of our lives. It will be the steadfast faith by which we have lived out his law and witnessed to him. It will be the works by which we have served him, even without knowing him, in the people he values. But it will always be the faith and the work that he has inspired, in which he has drawn us into a living relationship with him, by which he has shaped our hearts in his values, and because of which he includes us, in the end, as heirs of the kingdom.