

17 The People of the Kingdom

13: 22 – 14: 35

Jesus was still on his way to Jerusalem, speaking to people and teaching them as he passed thru towns and villages. Someone asked him whether only a few would be saved. When the kingdom came, would it be to the rescue of only a chosen few? Jesus seems to reply that yes it will be so. But he is not interested in abstract speculation about the kingdom. Even less is he interested in reassuring some small group that they are the chosen few, who may count on their inclusion. His answer is not a theoretical idea, but a practical recommendation, and an urgent one. Take nothing for granted. Strive to make your way in by the narrow gate. There's no broad avenue. Many will try to enter the kingdom, having their own ideas about the qualification, but they won't be able.

There are many who think that being an Israelite automatically qualifies them for a place within the kingdom of God, and that of course Israel will be that kingdom. But if they have not been among those who were alert and redy, responding to the coming of the kingdom, they will come to recognise what has happened only when it is too late. And if Israel itself is not redy, the people, the nation, the body politic, what then?

The kingdom of heven will be like a huge party, a feast where they will see their great ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sitting down to celebrate, and other people, the gentiles, coming in to join them while they, the Israelites, are left outside. They will be like guests who were slow to turn up for a party and arrive only after the doors have been closed and the festivities are under way. They will miss out.

Jesus is aware that the people of Israel do have a priority. After all, he is speaking to them, to get them redy for the kingdom of God. Everything he says refers to God who has long committed himself to Israel, and there is no question but that the offer of the kingdom is to them. But it will not always be so. Altho there is no sign of it happening yet as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, it will be so, and if Israel ignores its opportunity, the kingdom of God will be established – and a great joy and privilege it will be to be part of it – without them.

Here as elsewhere we have to rid ourselves of the idea that Jesus had in mind only a transcendent kingdom to be achieved in heven, after this world and its history is put behind us. Luke is emphatic that Jesus is talking

about this world and its history, and how that will unfold, even if there is as yet no clear timescale; for he goes strait on to show us the parable unfolding in the key political structures of Jesus' society and the increasingly confrontational events of Jesus' life.

Some Pharisees came to him with a warning: "Leave here quickly and get away, because Herod is going to kill you." But Jesus' replied: "Go and tell that fox, 'Today and tomorrow I will be casting out demons and working cures, but on the third day I will be finished. I have to continue my journey today and tomorrow and the next day, because there's no place for a prophet to meet his death except in Jerusalem.

(13: 31 - 34)

I believe that this is a key text for our understanding (and correcting our misunderstanding) of Jesus' work and particularly the great work of his death. He speaks of it as the death of a prophet, of one who in God's name challenges the rulers of his people and meets their hostility and their power. So it had been with Elijah, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, great prophetic figures from the history of Israel. They had clashed with the rulers of Israel in their attempt to persuade the nation to be faithful to the will of Yahweh their God. They had been met with threats, violence and expulsion, for the fidelity they demanded was social, political, economic and religious, the integrity of the whole nation before God, and it clashed with the plans of those who had their own way of maintaining power in Israel.

As I mentioned before, the scriptures as we now have them do not tell us about prophets dying in Jerusalem, except for the prophet Zechariah whom Jesus had mentioned earlier.¹ (There was also a tradition that Isaiah had been put to death there in the reign of Manasseh.) Jesus is not giving us a history lesson, but identifying with that prophetic role: speaking for the rule of God in opposition to the ruling powers, political, economic and religious, that have the power to kill. A prophet who speaks only of the affairs of another world, beyond history and beyond death, has little to fear from the powers of this world, but they will kill one who speaks of God's way for this world. And Jerusalem, the capital of Judea (and some would have it of all Israel) stood for political, economic and religious powers that seek to dominate in this world.

Jesus is saying in very concrete terms, in terms of his own imminent death in Jerusalem, that the kingdom of God is at odds, as the prophets were, with political and economic powers. For now ("today and tomorrow") Jesus

¹ 11: 51

Jesus Kyrios

continues casting out demons: these are not powers that can hurt him; but the powers he goes to confront in Jerusalem are deadly. The work of healing and casting out demons is important, but it is the work he goes to do in Jerusalem, and the powers he will confront there, that will really accomplish his mission.

Moreover, Jesus makes an important political point. He dismisses Herod and Herod's threats, for his business is with the real rulers of Israel. Now Herod was the Roman-appointed king over Galilee, the ruler of that Roman province in which Jesus lived. He had his own party of supporters: those who felt that they or the nation of Galilee stood to gain from co-operating with the Romans and, probably, resisting too much meddling from Jerusalem. He had the power to tax and to build, and had in fact constructed two cities in Galilee, but we are not told that Jesus ever went to them. Jesus did not clash with Herod as John the Baptist had done, criticising the behavior of the king and getting himself imprisoned for it.² For Jesus did not see either Herod or the Romans as the government of Israel in God's sight, to be addressed and challenged at the coming of God's kingdom. God's word is to Israel and the rule of God is a matter for Israel in the first place. It is Israel's response that matters.

His argument all along had been with those leaders who were native to Galilee (the rich landowners and leaders in the village assemblies) and those who, like the Pharisees, identified with Jerusalem and its promulgation of the Law of God. These represented the civic, political and religious Israel whom God had always acknowledged as God's people. Of course, his teaching challenges every form of power and economic domination, but, unlike John, he did not address it to the court of Herod, and he did not take his message to the Roman authorities. The apparent powers were sidelined, as Jesus addressed his invitation, and its challenge, to Israel. The people you are really interested in are the people you argue with.

But that does not mean at all that he was addressing a purely religious authority with an exclusively religious message. We can, in fact, recognise three patterns of political authority in Israel: the unmistakable fact of Roman sovereignty, enforced by their army; the effective authority delegated to Herod in Galilee; and the traditional authority of those who had a native claim to leadership. These latter were the wealthier Galilean landowners, exercising authority in the town or village assembly ("synagoge" as it is called in Greek) or, in a more technical and organised way, the "Sanhedrin" of the Jewish priests and their partners. The Romans themselves, who held

² Matthew 14: 1 - 12

all the ultimate power, had enough sense to work with this native leadership, especially in Jerusalem, as long as it did the job of keeping order in one of their provinces.

In identifying Jerusalem as his goal, Jesus is making a serious political statement. He must move on, even from the important work of healing and expelling demons. And when he does so, it will not be to challenge Roman power, or Herod's rule. He has already, and frequently, challenged the rich in Galilee, and now he will challenge the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. There is the crux of his proclamation of the kingdom, for the kingdom of God is God's offer and challenge to the nation of Israel.

We make a great mistake if we think that the significance of Jerusalem is only religious, or that the priests matter only because they represent the religious opposition to a theological teaching. The opposition to Jesus, the opposition to God's rule, is from those who have no intention of seeing their political and economic power diminished, much less of giving it up in favour of the poor. The priests were among the wealthiest citizens of Jerusalem and they meant to have influence, through their command of native law (the Law of Moses), over both the provinces of Judea and Galilee. Jesus recognised that this, and not the alien impositions of Rome, was the authority to be challenged. It is to this, the leadership of Israel, that God makes God's challenge, as God had made it before in the mouth of God's prophets.

The confrontation is political, because "political" means "of the body politic", of the people as a whole, brought together as one people. (And we shall see that, when it came to the crunch, whatever he had intended, his encounter in Jerusalem was with all the political powers.) Jesus is now getting serious about his own death, which can only be understood in terms of his confrontation with the ruling powers of his nation. It is a death in the tradition of the prophets, brought about by the powers that oppose God's plans for the world and its history. In speaking of his death, he does not point us to a theology of atonement, as we might find it in the letters of Paul, but to the prophetic tradition of challenge to the ruling classes, in the name of God, who rules all. There will be more, and there will be a time to discover more about the death of Jesus, but first we must take on board what Jesus is telling us here. If we bury these present words in another theology, we will miss what Luke has to tell us, and in fact what all the gospels have to tell us. One lesson at a time.

Jesus had spoken of the death of prophets in Jerusalem, thinking, as we know from his earlier reference, of the prophet Zechariah who was stoned to death in the court of the temple. (We might remember that, in Luke's text, we

Jesus Kyrios

have just been hearing of the Galileans who were slautered in the temple.) Zechariah had been killed, on the King's orders, after he proclaimed God's anger against the faithless people of Judah, and we are told in the book of Chronicles that, as he died, he cried out "Yahweh sees, and he will avenge!"³

It remains to be seen how Jesus' death will parallel that of the prophet, and we have not heard the last of Herod, who will reappear on the scene when all comes to fulfilment.

Jerusalem, the beloved and the enemy of God, is the enemy and the beloved of Jesus:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who murder the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children as a bird gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would have none of it. See, your house is left desolate to you. You will not see me again until you learn to say: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
(13: 34 - 35)

Jerusalem is headed for disaster, but it is not a disaster without hope. Jesus is speaking of a history still to come and events that will be enacted in the world. Jerusalem's temple will be abandoned, but the day will come (It has not come yet while 21st century Christians jealously divide up the paving stones in the "Church of the Sepulchre", and the children of Abraham drive the children of Abraham out of the City) but the day will come, for God's determination is long, when Jerusalem will learn to say from the heart: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

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He went to a meal in the house of a leading Pharisee. (It wasn't always hostility between Jesus and the Pharisees, for they had something in common in their sense of dedication to God, and what we get in parts of the gospel may be the end result, only after the relationship has broken down.) He noticed how people vied and jockeyed for the most prestigious positions at the table. (Where you got to sit, at a social banquet, was highly indicative of your status in society.) There were the little manoeuvres, the pretence of being polite but clearly putting forward your claim to a high position; there were the bold who simply stared down anyone pretending to outrank them; or the timid and unassertive who nonetheless hoped to slip into a prestigious place before anyone noticed.

³ 2Ch 24: 20 - 22

It was quite ridiculous really and Jesus thought he might help them to see the funny side. Look, he said, when you're invited into a wedding feast, don't go diving into the top place. Imagine what will happen. Someone more important might turn up – somebody so important he doesn't have to rush to grab a place; and the host will be obliged to ask you to step down. By now all the best places will be taken and you will have to go right to the bottom. The shame of it! And with everyone looking at you! No, when you're called in, go to the lowest place immediately. Your host will see you there and protest: "No, no, you must come up higher!" and everyone will see that you're held in great respect.

The joke is, of course, that what Jesus suggests is just as much a game as the silly manoeuvres of those who jostled for the prime positions. You still want kudos, but it's a bit cleverer, a bit more subtle. As jokes don't translate easily, across languages and across cultures, we probably miss a few of them in the bible, but here is one, and it makes a point. Jesus is only half serious about his suggestion for dinner-table tactics, but there is a serious point behind it. It is those who really humble themselves, who genuinely put themselves into a low-status position (not just as a tactic) who will be honoured by God. And those who make a point of asserting their status will be humbled by the power of God.

He had words of advice for his host also: When you give a dinner or a party, don't invite your friends or your family, or wealthy neighbors. They'll only respond in kind and you'll have had your payment. But when you give a party invite the poor, the crippled and the blind, and you will be blessed because they can't repay you. You will be rewarded when the just rise from the dead. (14: 12 – 14)

I have often reminded you that Jesus did not point his hearers to a kingdom in heaven but to the kingdom of heaven already appearing among us. That is not because he did not believe in a reach and a fulfilment of the kingdom beyond the world and beyond death, but for him it was of immediate significance that the kingdom was coming, already impinging on the history of the world. If we are to recognise the kingdom of God at all, we have to recognise it here, where it is meeting us. We should notice that now, when Jesus does speak of rewards beyond death, he refers not to a heaven of disembodied souls but to the rewards that come from the judgement of God when the dead are raised to life again. That, for Hebrew thinking, was an

Jesus Kyrios

event to be accomplished in this world. Jesus is much more focused on the realisation of the kingdom in this world than on a transcendent heaven.⁴

The great feast of the kingdom of God! It was something to look forward to with enthusiasm. Devout Israelites might dwell on the picture with fond anticipation. Blessed the man who sits at that feast in the kingdom of God! When one of his fellow-guests made the pious remark, Jesus responded with another story:

A man invited a large number of guests to a great banquet. When the time of the feast arrived, he sent his servant with the message, "Come, for it is all ready." But one by one they began to make excuses. The first said, "I've bought a field. I must go and take a look at it. Please convey my apologies." The next said, "I've just bought five yoke of oxen and I'm going to try them out. Please convey my apologies." Another said, "I've got married and so I cannot come."

The servant came back and delivered the messages to his master, who said to him angrily, "Go quickly to the streets and alleys of the city and bring back here the poor, the blind and the lame." When the servant said to him, "Master, it's been done as you commanded, but there's still room for more" the master told him: "Go out into the highways and the byways and compel them to come in, till my house is full, for I tell you none of those who were invited will share in my banquet."

(14: 16 - 24)

We say we want to be part of the kingdom, but when it comes to it, we've got a lot of excuses why we can't, or not at the moment. It sounds great while we're talking about it as a very future prospect, but when it's there, and we're invited to step in, we suddenly realise we have a lot of other priorities we weren't thinking about when we were all enthusiasm for the kingdom. We've got family responsibilities, a course to complete, investments to track, books to write and sermons to preach. Now is not the moment when we can drop it all and join in the kingdom.

Yes, the offer is to Israel, and it's for Israel to respond, but pious talk about the joys of the kingdom will not be enough, and if Israel balks at the prospect of the kingdom when it faces them in reality, God will not be put off. The

⁴ I do not wish to deny that Jesus' words and actions have a transcendent meaning beyond history and beyond death, but we can rightly come to that meaning only thru the meaning it has in the world where the kingdom is engaging us now.

kingdom will be established, and who knows who will be brought in to fill the party!

Crowds of people were coming to him, but he faced them and said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Would any of you set out to build a tower, without costing it first and making sure you had the resources? You wouldn’t want to get the foundations established, for everyone to see, without the wherewithal to go any further. You’d be a laughing stock. Or a king going out to do battle with another king – wouldn’t he take stock of his forces and make up his mind whether he can face and overcome the superior forces ranged against him? If he decides not, he sends a team to negotiate the best terms he can get for withdrawing from battle.

Jesus is speaking to those who are thinking they want to be his disciples, following and learning from him. It is a very serious undertaking. To emphasise the choice and commitment they are making, he uses the stark Hebrew expression of loving and hating, which comes to us very strangely thru Greek and English translation: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

Of course, Jesus is not recommending the emotion or the vice of hatred. The contrast of “loving” and “hating” is an idiomatic way of expressing a final and decisive choice between one and another. When it comes to the crunch, the disciple of Jesus must choose to follow Jesus even against the wishes and the interests of wife, husband, sisters, brothers, parents, children. Now as long as we think of discipleship as a purely religious matter, it’s hard to imagine any conflict with family that warrants Jesus’ choice of the stark Hebrew expression. A family of third-generation atheists may feel let down by one of its members who “gets religion”, but they’ll get over it. But if the decision has strong political and economic dimensions, even if it is made in all that love which Jesus teaches, it will feel like hatred to those who find themselves rejected.

An English family with a long army tradition: great-grandfathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, brothers, sons and daughters have distinguished themselves in the armed forces and the whole clan is proud of its military connections. They are proud to worship in that little English Church where the old colors of the family’s favorite regiment are hung respectfully. Then one of their daughters or sons declares a conviction that Jesus himself has exposed war as selfish and futile, that the very battles

Jesus Kyrios

that made many a career in their family were acts of aggression against the peoples of India or Africa, that the bombers of Dresden were no better than the bombers of Coventry. To such a family, such a convert, following Jesus' teaching to love your enemies, may seem to hate them, to have betrayed them.

Think of a successfully wealthy family anywhere in the world. They have a passion for making money, and because they don't break the law in doing so – they're wealthy enough to pay lawyers to find them loopholes in the law – they believe that their enterprise is moral, and as ethical as anything needs to be. Even when there are rivalries in the family, the rivalries reaffirm the fundamental commitment to money: they're trying to outdo each other in money-making. And whatever skills or connections they have, each one is expected to use them to increase the overall influence of the family. When one of them follows Jesus in seeking the surrender of property and power in favour of the poor, and criticises the selfish amassing of goods and influence, they will seem to have turned against their family.

A simple American family, proud of their country and its opportunities, who thought that wherever there flew the star-spangled banner, they could look on it with pride and something close to worship, for God himself inspired the American way – such a family may be deeply hurt and confused when a sister or a brother shows that they have learnt the responsibility of a disciple, and challenges the evils of America, its idolatry of money and its world-wide abuse of power to manipulate the rich and oppress the poor.

Jesus does not teach hatred of anyone, not even of the rich and powerful. But he teaches a way which to choose is to turn against the accepted ways and convictions of people, families, communities, nations, and their attitudes to the making and using of wealth or power. It will take conviction to follow him, and to make the choices that set us against even the people most dear to us. A disciple of Jesus must be prepared to say goodbye to all their possessions and all their connections.

A disciple of Jesus is to be the salt that gives flavour to the whole of society. But if salt loses its taste how can you salt it again? You have to throw it out. It's not even fit to be manure! The disciple must be true to their calling. In the kingdom as it comes among us, claiming us and commissioning us for its work, it's like yeast working quietly on the heavy, sullen dough, to transform it into light, edible bread. It's like the tree with branches reaching out in all directions, so that, like birds coming to roost, the rest of the human order, civic, political, economic, religious, comes together and finds a home. It's like salt, working its way through the food we eat and enlivening its best flavours. Far from being a club of the separate

and elite, or a purely religious institution, or a retreat into the transcendent and the future, the kingdom is to be the transforming energy, the framework, the flavoring of all society.