

# THY KINGDOM COME – IS KINGDOM NOW?

## by R H Johnston

### Introduction

Jesus speaks a great deal concerning the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven, and says we should pray for it to come (Matthew 6:10). The Jews seem to have generally, but wrongly, understood Him to be talking about the restoration of national sovereignty to the people of Israel. This was an understandable desire for a people who had suffered successive waves of foreign occupation, culminating in the Roman occupation. But Jesus disabused them of this by saying "*My Kingdom is not of this world*" (John 18:36). This error survives to this day, having its clearest manifestation in the post-millennial theology of the "Restoration" churches, and the Roman Catholic Church. Both see the kingdom of God as something to be established by the Church on this present earth, prior to the coming of the Lord. This necessarily makes their agenda ultimately political.

### The desire to rule distorted by the Fall

All men like the idea of being in control: this was the root of the temptation in the Garden of Eden: "*you will be as gods*" (Genesis 3:5). Indeed the occult world is centrally concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and power. When people err from the Truth that wrong ideas on the issue of power and authority become dominant.

### Rebellious Christians seek to rule

Thus it is not surprising that at the rebellious church at Corinth, the idea that Christians are already kings should have become established (1 Corinthians 4:8). We are not yet in that position, though many today would try to persuade us that we are, that the kingdom is already apparent, and that we can exercise its full authority. Jesus dealt with this attitude specifically in a parable (Luke 19:11-27), and in his last message on earth to his disciples in Acts 1:6-8.

### The obvious Kingdom of God is in the future

Acts 1:6-8 shows that rather than an immediate manifestation of the kingdom, the Christians were to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, not "to bring in the kingdom", but to "*be witnesses unto Jesus*" in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit would enable to do this until the Lord's return (Acts 1:11). This would involve the church in carrying out the continuation of exactly the same ministry that Jesus did, and under the same limitations which He experienced.

In Luke 19:11 we read "... *He went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God were going to appear immediately.*" Thus this parable addresses directly those who would have the kingdom of God on earth now.

What follows in the passage is very illuminating. A nobleman (Jesus) is going to a far country to receive a kingdom. In the meantime, ten chosen from his servants (Christians) are given sums of money to trade with until his return (the second coming) (v13). The rest of his subjects (especially the unbelieving Jews) refuse to accept that the nobleman shall become king over them (v14). On his return, after receiving the kingdom, the king receives account of the servants, and rewards the successful with the exercise of authority over cities, according to their success in trading (v17, 19), and punishes the servant who has proved himself worthless. The rebellious subjects are slain (v27).

An important thing to notice in the parable is the difference of the situations of the successful servants before and after the king's return. Beforehand they are **traders**. A trader must make the best use of the opportunities which present themselves. He has no control over market conditions, or the actions of others. He is in a situation which is inherently hostile (as revealed by the attitude of the worthless servant). A trader must look for the areas where investment will be profitable and try to avoid making bad investments. He must also know when to cut his losses. This is not an easy task, but it is one which reveals and develops character. The trader quickly learns that he is not in a position to impose his own will on others, just as he wishes. It is an excellent school in humility.

The faithful servants receive as their reward after the king's return positions of authority, according to their ability, albeit under the authority of the king. They are given real power to decree what others may do. Without the recognition of the authority of the king such rule would be despotic - hence the schooling as a trader. It is only those who have learned the humble position of a trader who may be safely be allowed to exercise authority. (This explains why Christians may not do so now: all attempts at government by the "Rule of the Saints" have been notable for their despotism, which is not at all consistent with the righteous rule of Christ.)

The interpretation of the parable is quite clear. We are now in the trading situation, where we must make the best use of the opportunities for the advancement of God's work which are presented to us. This is brought out very clearly in Ephesians 5:16 where we are told to redeem the time, which in Greek has the force of making the most of every opportunity. There will be many areas where we cannot have an impact - as good traders we will leave those areas for some other occasion.

It may come as a surprise to realise that Jesus Himself was limited by these considerations, but there were places where "*he could do no mighty work, because of their unbelief*" (Matthew 13:58). This shows that Jesus Himself realised that there were peoples and places amongst whom effective work was impossible. His failure to convince the Pharisees and Israel's rulers is perhaps the most important example. The need to make the best use of opportunities as they presented themselves explain his movements, and their timing, during his ministry. So, for example, in John 7:5-8 he says to his natural relatives, your time is always ready, in contrast to his own need to consider timing carefully (a word for over-zealous would-be evangelists?). Jesus needed to know from God where the areas of successful opportunity would appear. In the light of this, some of his most interesting encounters (e.g. the woman at the well in John 4) are then seen to be no accident.

In instructing his disciples, Jesus made clear that they were to move on if their evangelistic attempts were unwelcome (Matthew 10:11-15,23-24), the reason being that there will always be other places to carry out evangelism more profitably (Matthew 10:23). There is no trace in the gospels of the unbiblical idea of attempting to disarm spiritual forces in an area in order to evangelise people who are unwilling. Jesus had moved on Himself where His ministry had made Him unwelcome (e.g. Luke 4:30-31; Matthew 8:34-9:1).

The gospels emphasise the wide extent of Jesus' authority, but nevertheless carefully show that He had no intention of enforcing His rule on those who were unwilling to receive Him (compare Matthew 12:19). Jesus left such matters to the day of judgement (Matthew 11:20-24). The reader should carefully read through all the gospels to observe the way Jesus accepted the limitations other people's reactions placed on His ministry and how He responded: such study will prove very instructive.

Nor were Jesus and His disciples alone in acting as traders. Paul's missionary journeys were characterised by the same making use of opportunities and of taking note of where the Spirit would not allow them to go (see Acts 16:6-8).

When the Lord returns, the period of Millennial rule will take place. Those who have been faithful servants will be rewarded with the authority to rule parts of that kingdom, over those who did not become Christians.

### **The present aspects of the kingdom of God**

Of course, the kingdom of God is not entirely in the future: we have been transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of God's Son (Colossians 1:13). Foremost amongst Jesus's statements which have a present aspect is "*the Kingdom of God is within you*" or "*among you*" or "*in your midst*"

(Luke 17:21). This text has received many interpretations, and has been contrived to suggest that the kingdom is already capable of being fully manifest now. Yet Luke 17:20 immediately preceding this says that the kingdom of God does **not** come with signs to be observed. This demolishes completely the delusive dream that we should set up one big and unified church organisation which will prominently rule the earth.

Clearly, the fact of Jesus's presence brought something of God's rule to bear, and the deliverance of people from demons and from sicknesses attests this. But the gospels show its manifestation was always confined to those who were willing to receive these things - in other places he could do no mighty work because of unbelief. But the real work of God is internal, in men's hearts, concerning their relationship to God, their acceptance of His sovereignty. The kingdom of God, that is, God's rulership, is made effective within those who receive Jesus.

This shows that where men receive from God something of what God would give them, something of God's kingdom is established there (compare John 1:12). Where men refuse it, they will be ultimately destroyed, like the rebels of Luke 19:27, but in the meantime they are allowed to continue in rebellion. In such people the kingdom of God is not come, nor can the kingdom be made to come within them by others.

It is probably true to say that God also rules in a limited way in people who have not become Christians in so far as they do things of which God approves. Such people seem likely to survive during the Millennial kingdom - otherwise over whom are the Lord's servants to rule at that time? This would apply too to the many people who happily received healing and deliverance from Jesus, yet never truly became disciples.

This has implications for our work in Christ, how we should pray, for whom and for what. There is no point in trying to achieve something which is in "an adverse trading situation". There is no point in praying for what God is unwilling to give. In this way we learn it is not our will which prevails but God's. Even in this latter respect, it seems that God has in some measure limited his own actions to accommodate the refusal of men who do not want to do what He wants.

We must therefore look for the profitable opportunities - if something does not seem to be working out - that is, if there is no settled witness from God that we should continue to pursue a certain line, then we may leave it, and seek him for a more effective opportunity. Thus we learn how to "cut our losses" as traders. This is clearly the case in the case of evangelism - the purpose here being to get as many people under God's benign rule as possible. Jesus' instructions are clear - if people do not wish to hear, move on to speak to others who will (Matthew 10:14-25).

## **Can we rule the nations now?**

Some people have suggested that Christians should rule over national and international issues by means of prayer, to conform those situations to the standards of the kingdom of God. The text usually quoted in support of this is Psalm 110:2. However the connection with the day of judgement (Psalm 110:5-7), clearly shows that this Psalm (like the Luke parable) is looking forward to the Millennial Kingdom, the kingdom revealed in Daniel 7.

Certainly God commands that we should pray for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-4) - and the ultimate reason given for this is that men might be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (v4). This focus should always be borne in mind - simply having a nice life on earth as a result of good rulership is no good if it allows men easy lives which allow them to forget God and go to hell.

Observation has shown that prayer on national issues is only successful on those issues where most ordinary people are on the same side as the one who prays.

This explains the success of people like Rees Howells<sup>1</sup> and those with him in World War II. They were fighting the Evil One under the direction of the Lord, and had "on their side" many people throughout the world who wanted righteous government to prevail.

By contrast, where the "trading conditions" are adverse, as for instance on abortion law and similar issues in Britain, prayer and overcoming on such issues has invariably failed.

This shows the way of wisdom for the trader who prays about political issues: he should concentrate on establishing God's righteousness in those areas where the prospects are best (as determined by the revelation of God). By doing so, the extension of God's rule is likely to develop most fully, and as a result the number of people who see the benefits of God's righteousness, and who may therefore be disposed to repent, is maximised. Those people who submit to God's sovereignty will be Jesus's witnesses to the coming kingdom of God, and their lives will be oases of God's kingdom.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to be under no illusions about what Christians can achieve now. Scripture clearly prophesies that "trading conditions" will deteriorate, with the

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of his life, see Rees Howells: Intercessor, by Norman Grubb

revelation of Anti-Christ, etc., and that it will always be a minority who will repent and find the narrow way that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14). The church will never establish the kingdom of God on earth: Acts 1:5-8 shows this is not our task. Rather, we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28) and seek a city which is to come (Hebrews 13:14), which is not on this earth, but which comes down from heaven (Revelation 21:2).

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These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk)

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