

Thursday Theology: May 8, 2020

Co-Missioners,

From Richard Gahl comes another installment in his ongoing series on the mission of the Church. We send it along for your reflection and encouragement.

Dick's closing observations prompt us to remind you of a forthcoming series of [Bread for the World webinars](#). We mentioned these two weeks ago. They're scheduled for May 19 through May 21. The news this week brings reports of growing hunger in the U.S. [Here's one from Monday's Washington Post](#). All the more reason to learn what Bread is doing and how you can help.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

On Earth as in Heaven



This series has focused on the church as agent of God's mission. It operates with the premise that the New Testament is a textbook of instruction for the post-resurrection church as it carries out its charge to bring God's mission to the world.

This installment directs attention to Matthew's summary descriptions of the ministries of both John the Baptist (3:2) and Jesus (4:17). They inaugurate a specific proclamation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Later, when Jesus sends the disciples on a first mission trip, he tells them, "As you go, proclaim the Good News, the kingdom of heaven has come near" (10:7). Again, note that word "proclaim." A form of it is used in each of these three settings.

A usual reading of these passages highlights the word "repent." But an exclusive concentration on that word misses the reason for its call to change the way we think and act. Why do this? Because the kingdom of heaven is near. This kingdom of heaven is the content of the proclamation—the Gospel, the Good News.

Matthew will be the primary basis for this present study of the term.

The Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13) provides one lens for viewing "kingdom of heaven" language. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven." Normally these two petitions are viewed separately. But what happens if we let one interpret the other? The kingdom—on earth. What happens if the presence of God in heaven is near, is coming into this world? Is not God's will being done on earth as in heaven when John, Jesus, and the disciples start to proclaim this?

An operating thesis might be stated as follows: heaven is where God is. The kingdom of heaven on earth is God's desire, God's goal for this planet. John sets the stage for it. Jesus is crucified to underwrite it and raised to new life to direct its unfolding. We are now the baptized agents of that kingdom today, a new kind of society, a new creation. Heaven on earth is where God's good and gracious will is being done, however imperfectly.

What
is
the
evidence
to
support
this
thesis?



1. Joel Green's article "The Kingdom of God/Heaven" in the second edition of *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* is a good place to begin. Green reports that the word "kingdom" (Gk. *basilea*) is used 126 times in the four gospels: 55 times in Matthew, 20 in Mark, 46 in Luke (8 in

Acts), and five times in John. He observes that kingdom language is used in twenty-five of Matthew's twenty-eight chapters. (I may have missed something, but I failed to find *basilea* in four of the chapters: 1, 2, 27, 28.) Green also finds an equivalence in related expressions: kingdom, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, kingdom of the Father, kingdom of Jesus, and kingdom of the Son of Man. By my count Matthew uses "the kingdom of heaven" thirty-one times, all but one these as a genitive plural, the other as a dative plural. Matthew also speaks four times of "the kingdom of God." Kingdom of God is used fourteen times in Mark, 32 times in Luke, and twice in John. Green identifies two main thrusts: 1. The kingdom is entered. 2. The kingdom is proclaimed. The content of that proclamation is our primary interest here.

2. Green also reports that the New Testament use of "kingdom" finds its grounding throughout the Old Testament in expressions such as "the kingdom of Yahweh" (1 Chron. 28:5, 2 Chron. 13:8). The OT refers to God as king forty-five times, speaks of God reigning as king thirteen times, and describes God as sitting on a throne twenty times. The prophets make regular reference to God's reign. Isaiah, for example, anticipates the end of the exile and the restoration of Israel, the goal of which is God's return to Zion "Here is your God" (Is. 40:9). The good news brought to Zion is that "Your God rules as king" (Is. 53:7).
3. Matthew's kingdom language is preeminently "the kingdom of heaven." The other Gospels use "kingdom of God," a term that Matthew employs only four times. Everywhere else he

says "kingdom of heaven." Joel Green reports a common theory that because Matthew is writing primarily for a Jewish Christian audience, he respects the aversion to voicing the word for God ("Yahweh" in Hebrew). But Green also suggests the Matthew is deliberately emphasizing the heavenly origins and nature of the kingdom. N.T. Wright's *Matthew for Everyone* proposes that we clear our minds of the thought that the kingdom of heaven is a place where people go after death. He notes that this makes no sense. How could such a kingdom be said to be approaching or arriving? Writing about the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:1ff.), Wright comments: "The life of heaven—the life of the realm where God already is king—is to become the life of the world, transforming the present earth into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended. And those who follow Jesus are to begin to live by this rule in the here and now." Wright goes on to make a convincing case for this.

4. The kingdom and John the Baptist: in Matthew 11 John sends some of his disciples to Jesus with the question: "Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?" Jesus answers by reviewing the optics. "'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (vv. 4-5). Jesus adds a further interpretation of John to those present, asserting that John had been forcefully advancing the kingdom until his imprisonment. "Of all people born, no one is greater than John," he says. Then comes a a surprising turn: "The least important person in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John" (v. 11). N.T. Wright explains thus: "Jesus was

offering a new way of understanding God's timetable. He was telling his hearers that Israel's long history was a long getting ready line. Now that perspective was over. John was indeed the greatest among the preparers, but even the most insignificant person who was accepting God's kingdom and living by it—in other words, who was hearing Jesus and following him—was 'greater' simply because they were living in the time of fulfillment."

5. Pictures of the kingdom. As underscored in previous posts of this mission thread, three verbs are characteristic of Jesus ministry: proclaiming, healing, teaching. He announces the presence of the Kingdom of Heaven. His miracles of healing are pointers as to what the kingdom of heaven will be like, and already is. He uses parables to explain the kingdom: the sower, the mustard seed, the hidden treasure, the search for the precious pearl, etc. Above all, he overturns what is taken for granted about the way life works. In chapter 18, for example, he rejects the usual standards of what constitutes "the greatest"—e.g. the strongest, the fittest, the loudest, the angriest, the pushiest. Instead he calls out a little child: shy, vulnerable, unsure of self, but trusting with a clear eye, ready to listen, to be loved and to love, to learn and to grow. This is true greatness. In Chapter 19 he reverses codes of everyday honor: many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. In Chapter 22 we are taken to a wedding party where the host provides not just food and drink, but the party clothes. And as Wright observes, if you refuse to wear the garments provided you are saying that you do not wish to stay at the party. This is a not-so-subtle way of reminding hearers that the clothes of the kingdom involve changing

the way you think and act. God loves everyone, but that doesn't mean we get to stay the way we were.

6. An important aside. This writer has been troubled for some time by a popular interpretation of Matthew's texts on "treasures in heaven" (cf. 6:19-21, 19:21). It goes like this: doing good things, acting charitably, etc. builds up credit in a heavenly good-works bank deposit system. Picture the supplicant at the pearly gates in conversation with St. Peter the gatekeeper.

"If you check my Treasures in Heaven bank account you will see that I have built up a nice balance. Oh, it's probably not as much as I had hoped, but I did as best I could with circumstances for my church, Lutheran World Relief, the United Way, food drives, the college annual fund. I could go on, but you get the picture and have the records to document it. May I come in?"

That pretend conversation is infected with far too much of the old works-righteousness gremlin. It may "work" as a fund-raising strategy. But, "I deserve entrance to heaven because of the good things I have done" is a gross insult to the grace of God. Let's say it bluntly: Heavenly Retirement Accounts need to be banished! In Mt. 19 Jesus is in conversation with a wealthy young man who wants to join up. Jesus tells him to sell his possessions and give the funds to the poor. Then he will have treasure in heaven. Then he can follow Jesus. But the young man goes away grieving. The next verses connect back to the kingdom of heaven, with the question of how



one enters it. Jesus conjures the absurd image of a grumpy old camel who tries to squeeze through the eye of a needle. That's the rich person trying to force his way into the kingdom of heaven. It can't be done. The disciples despair. Nobody can make it in if the rich can't. Jesus promptly sets them straight: nobody, yes nobody, can qualify themselves for the kingdom—for them, that's impossible. But for God, all things are possible.

The Kingdom of heaven shines a new light on treasuring. The Good News is that the kingdom of heaven is breaking into the here and now – doing on earth the will of God just as it is being done in His presence today. N. T. Wright has an enlightening insight into the scene in chapter 16, at Caesarea Philippi when Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus responds about building the church. He is not going to build a city or even a temple. He is going to build a community (church) of all those who give allegiance to him as God's anointed king. This community starts at Caesarea Philippi. Dare we add to Wright's comment that this community continues to proclaim and do God's kingdom wherever and whenever they happen to be?

7. Some concluding thoughts with Covid-19 in mind. Proclaiming the kingdom of Heaven means pointing to the new creation that had been long awaited by prophets and seers. John the Baptist gave notice that the Promise was now in the starting blocks. Jesus pointed to the new life that was already emerging in that day with the miracles being the flashing signs. Then he did what only he could do to make it erupt into reality. With the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit the new begins in earnest. And the church is sent out: Go! The words of Wright's *Surprised by Hope* sums up the going:

Just as Jesus taught his followers to pray that God's Kingdom

would come on earth as in heaven, so now he claims that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and on that basis commands the disciples to go and make it happen—to work in other words, as agents of that authority. What remains implicit in Mark, at least as we have it, is made explicit in Matthew: resurrection does not mean escaping from the world; it means mission to the world based on Jesus leadership over the world.

For emphasis sake, let's pick up a different image. Light is a major theme in the Gospel of John, but we have to go back to Isaiah 9 to connect the kingdom of Heaven with God's promise. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a bright light. The light will shine on those who live in the land of death's shadow." Fast forward to Ephesians. "Once you lived in the dark, but now the Lord has filled you with light." A few verses later: "And you will shine with Christ's light." Not just seeing light but doing light. On earth as in heaven. That's who we are. That's what God's people do.

Writing these words on April 22, I see a stunning contrast between the old kingdom we're used to and the Kingdom we pray for. In one picture protesters are demanding their freedom back. Enough of the government stopping us from doing what we want to do when we want to do it. This is a free country. We demand our freedom now! The other image unfolds at Cleveland's airport on April 17. Twenty-five Cleveland Clinic doctors and nurses board a plane for New York City where, for the next month, they will bring help to the harried medical teams in that hot spot. We soon see the marks of the PPE face mask on bruised, exhausted Cleveland faces. Their first words at the hospital entrance are: "Lead us to where we can help so that some will have a chance to recover."

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Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community