

# The Kingdom

*In Jesus the kingdom begins to break in ahead of time*

## COMING OF THE KINGDOM

### Dawn and the morning star

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"  
You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day  
dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts'  
(2Pt 1:9)

"I, Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches.  
I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star"  
(Rev 22:16)

As our focus of hope falls on the person of Jesus, the New Testament writers see us moving from the darkness of night where hope is like the flickering light of a small clay oil-lamp, significant but fragile, towards the intense luminescence of dawn and its herald in the morning star. Hope is seen as the light of a new day; the source of that light is Jesus the Messiah, 'the sun of righteousness',<sup>1</sup> and the impact of the sunlight it brings is *shalom*.

The 'star' grew to become an important messianic symbol and title during the few centuries prior to Jesus' birth. Inspired by the prophetic words:

"A star shall come forth from Jacob"  
(Num 24:17)

Echoed in the beautiful expression of hope:

'And after these things a star shall arise to you from Jacob in peace,  
And a man shall arise from my seed, like the sun of righteousness,  
Walking with the sons of men in meekness and righteousness,  
And no sin shall be found in him'  
(Test of Judah 24:1-6)

We can see clearly how these ideas are picked up in both clear and subtle ways in an early Christian understanding of Jesus. The Magi are guided to his birthplace in Bethlehem by a star (Mt 2:2,9-10). Suddenly amid the star-lit night sky there is angelic light and a message that Messiah is born, with the declaration, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace ...' (Lk 2:8-14). Later there would develop the understanding that Jesus was the 'light of the world' (Jn 8:12; see also 1:4-5, 7-9; 9:5; 12:46).

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<sup>1</sup> See Mal 4:2 – 'But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall'.



Jesus' birth and subsequent life was seen as a blaze of dazzling light that ignited a fire of hope in the hearts of those closest to him. Jesus' message of hope found its focus and power in the concept of the kingdom of God.

### **John: heralding hope**

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the  
tender mercy of our God,  
when the day shall dawn upon us from on high  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace”  
(Lk 1:76-79)

These words of Zachariah, father of the infant John (later to be known as ‘the Baptist’), continue the theme of darkness, dawn and peace. Years later a mature John strode out from the Judean wilderness in a way that riveted the attention of every Jew of his day, stirred their hopes, sent them back to their roots and challenged the integrity of every heart:

“Repent,  
for the kingdom of God is at hand”  
(Mt 3:2)

These words broke the prophetic silence of centuries, during which time Israel's hope had become clouded by theological speculation and political frustration, by the apocalyptic writer and the dangerous zealot. John refocused all this.

John epitomised the classical Hebrew prophet. His rough clothing identified him with none other than the great Elijah (Mk 1:6), the one who was to return as the forerunner to the Messiah (Mal 4:5) and so he was (Mt 11:13-14). The excitement in the air was electric (Lk 3:15). Here was no dreamer, no political activist, but a true messenger from God.

God is about to act within the present order of things.<sup>2</sup> There is no timetable of events, simply a statement of facts. John painted with the eschatological images of fire and harvest (Mt 3:7-12; Lk. 3:7-9; 16-17), presenting the only alternatives as salvation or judgment. However, the dramatic new concept that John introduced was to link this event with reference to someone ‘who comes after me’ (Mat 3:11). John presents the Messiah as the inaugurator of God's kingdom and agent of salvation and judgment; never before had this connection been made.<sup>3</sup>

John was the herald, and the mark of preparation was repentance, the change of mind that brought about a change of life, demonstrated by baptism in water. It all set the scene for Jesus to begin his work.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The kingdom of God is at hand’ – it is so close that you can almost reach out and touch it’.

<sup>3</sup> For all the new elements he brought to the hope, even John could not comprehend the true nature of Messiahship (Lk 7:19)



## Jesus: incarnating hope

It was in obscurity (Jn 1:46), poverty (Lk 1:48; 2:7) and ignominy (Jn 8:41), that the promised hope begins to be realised. Even John, as yet unborn, leaped in response to Jesus' presence in Mary's womb (Lk 1:41); old Simeon sees in the infant Jesus 'the consolation of Israel', and dies in peace (Lk 2:30). Years later John identifies Jesus as 'The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1:29). For his part Jesus identified himself with John's ministry and at his baptism received heavenly approval (Mk 1:9-11). Here was the long awaited Messiah, 'Christ Jesus our hope' (1Tim 1:1).

Jesus comes to John to be baptized. In doing so he not only identifies with John but more importantly with those people he has come to save. As Jesus comes out of the water, 'the heavens are torn apart', there is the voice of God's approval and he is marked out as the one who is the 'bringer and the giver of the Spirit'. The barrier between heaven and earth is shredded (as at Jesus' birth). The new creation is inaugurated - the earth and the cosmos beginning to be baptized in a wave of 'holy Spirit and fire' – this is the true meaning of 'baptism in the Spirit'. This sets the scene for Jesus' public ministry to begin. Moving up from Judea to Galilee he proclaims:

“The time is fulfilled,  
the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel”  
(Mk 1:14-15)

Jesus' message is *not* identical to John's; there is a fundamental difference. It is the difference between 'two minutes to midnight' and 'the midnight hour itself'. The distinguishing phrase 'the time is fulfilled'. Jesus proclamation brings an actual shift in the ages. From now on God's kingdom is actually breaking and present in every word and deed of Jesus. The keynote is 'fulfillment'. This sets Jesus apart from the rest of Judaism; whose deep eschatological hopes of divine visitation, and the coming of the messianic age are actually being fulfilled.

In the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus proclaims 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...' with the promise of accompanying blessings (Lk 4:18-21 fulfilling Isa 61). Jesus does not just promise of an apocalyptic kingdom or better future but actually brings salvation into the present now! The kingdom of God is here; it is an immediate reality, a new event in history. It has been well said, 'What we call the ministry of Jesus is in fact the rule of God'.

The messianic banquet has begun. It is time for feasting not fasting, the bridegroom has come; new wine is flowing, new wineskins are required; it is harvest time (Mk 2:18-28). The new age is to be enjoyed. They are seeing an age that ancient prophets and kings longed to see but could not (Lk 10:23-24; Mat 13:16-17). Scripture is being fulfilled, the blessings of the new age are here (Mat 11:2-6, Lk.7:18-23; cf Isa 35:5-10; 29:18-19; 61:1-4); "Go tell John ...".

Here is salvation brought by the Messiah; promises and dreams are being fulfilled in the most unexpected ways. However, final eschatological consummation still lies in the future, that is still to come. The truth of Jesus' message of the kingdom of God lies in the creative tension between these two extremes.

## CONCEPT OF THE KINGDOM

### *Malkuth and Basileia*

The focus of hope lies in the 'kingdom of God', It has in fact been stated that it is 'the dynamic concept of the kingdom of God that binds the testaments together'. It embraces all the facets and emphasis of Jesus' teaching including present salvation and future consummation.

We have noticed previously that the phrase 'kingdom of God' is virtually absent from the Hebrew scriptures (cf. 1Chr 29:11). However, the concept of Kingship is everywhere. God is king, Hebrew kings rule solely as his agents, and ministers according to the terms of his covenant. Failure to do this could only result in judgment.

The biblical words for 'kingdom' are *malkuth* (Heb) and *basileia* (Gk). Unlike the English word they do not convey the concrete idea of 'realm' but rather the abstract dynamic idea of 'reign', 'rule', 'dominion' and 'sovereignty'.<sup>4</sup>

Jewish Rabbis spoke of God's 'kingdom' as divine sovereignty, an eternal fact that endures forever and ever. People experience 'the kingdom of God' by obedience to the *Torah*. Daily repetition of the *Shema* (Dt 6:4-9) was regarded as continually taking upon oneself 'the yoke of the sovereignty of God'.<sup>5</sup> *Malkuth* is always there, waiting for individuals to submit to it; yet it does not come fully until the end of the age. The idea of God's rule is almost always abstract in its meaning, yet dynamic in its eschatological context.

These are the ideas against which the teaching of Jesus must be understood. They help us understand what he assumed, and the unique elements that he presents. A careful understanding of his use of 'kingdom' is essential.

### 'Heaven', 'Life' and 'Spirit'

Matthew's gospel uses the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' 34 times.<sup>6</sup> This difference has provoked much unnecessary speculation, because the phrase means exactly the same as the 'kingdom of God'. It is simply the more natural Jewish expression that stresses the source and character of the kingdom. Reverence also makes Jews are more reluctant to speak the name God directly unless absolutely necessary. 'Kingdom of heaven' would most likely to have been the more natural style that Jesus would have used.

John's gospel, with only two exceptions (3:3,5), does not speak of the 'kingdom of God'. Instead it uses the recurring phrase is 'eternal life'. This literally means 'the life of eternity' or, 'the life of the age to come'. It emphasises that it is the quality of life God personally enjoys. It is exactly synonymous with the phrase 'kingdom of God'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of 'kingdom' as 'realm' is rare but not impossible, on occasions as in Esther *malkuth* is used of the reign of the king (4:14) and of the realm over which he reigns (3:6,8).

<sup>5</sup> When a Gentile became a Jewish proselyte they also shouldered the yoke of the sovereignty of heaven. This gives unique meaning to, 'take my yoke upon you...' (Mt 11:30)

<sup>6</sup> See Mt 12:28; 19:24; 21:31,43 for the phrase 'kingdom of God'

<sup>7</sup> It is significant that 'eternal life' is first mentioned in John 3:15 only and immediately after the two solitary references to the 'kingdom of God' in the gospel (3:3,5).



Moving beyond the Gospels the phrase 'kingdom of God' gives place to references to the life of the Spirit; but they are one and the same thing. John the Baptist proclaims that the one with whom the kingdom comes will, 'baptise you in Holy Spirit' (Mk 1:8). Jesus moves from the wilderness into the spotlight 'in the power of the Spirit' (Lk 4:14). Jesus first statement about himself says, 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me' (Lk 4:18). Being 'born of the Spirit' and 'entering the kingdom of God' are one and the same thing (Jn 3:5). The dynamic power of the Spirit in expelling evil forces is irrefutable proof that the kingdom of God is come (Mt 12:28).

'The kingdom of God is not food and drink  
but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'  
(Rom. 14:17)

## **JESUS AND THE KINGDOM**

### **Kingdom come**

The closest we get to a definition of the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching are the profound words:

"Your Kingdom come,  
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"  
(Mat 6:10).

Jesus takes the simple eschatological expectations of the day and shows that the truth is far more complex, subtle and beautiful. There is no simple definition of the 'kingdom' because what is revealed is a 'mystery' open only to those with the eyes to see and the ears to hear (Mk 4:9-12).

As we look in more detail at the emphasis Jesus gives to the concept of 'the kingdom of God', we are presented with what can be helpfully described as a series of concentric circles flowing outward.

### **Present and personified**

Jesus as a person is the quintessence of the kingdom. He displays the sovereignty of God, lives in total obedience to the Father only doing God's will (Jn 5:19,30). Every word and act of Jesus was a presentation and demonstration of the immediate presence of the kingdom of God. Two central passages that emphasize this:

'If it is by the Spirit (finger) of God that I cast out demons,  
then the kingdom of God has come upon you'  
(Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20)<sup>8</sup>

'The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,  
nor will they say, "Lo, here it is!" or "There!",  
for behold the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you'  
(Lk 17:20-21)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This verse suggests an element of surprise, the kingdom has arrived in advance and unexpectedly, but it is dramatically present.

<sup>9</sup> This verse can grammatically be translated 'within you', emphasising a personal spiritual response to the kingdom. Nevertheless, a full translation must make it focus on Jesus' presence (people enter the kingdom



Both these scriptures are emphatic that the kingdom of God is a present reality encountered by the people who witnessed Jesus' ministry.

### **Received and entered**

Jesus not only personifies the kingdom of God but also declares that 'it is at hand' (Mt 4:17; 10:7; Mk 1:14-15), that is within the grasp of all who hear his proclamation. It is no longer simply to be awaited it must be received and entered. It is to be sought first and foremost above all other things (Mt 6:33; Lk 12:31). It is to be received like a child (Mk 10:14-15; Lk 18:16-17; Mt 18:1-4; 11:25), and forcibly entered by tax collectors and harlots (Lk 16:16; Mt 21:31), while scribes and Pharisees camouflage the entrance by their teachings (Mt 23:13; Lk 11:52). Nevertheless some scribes are trained in its truth (Mt 13:52). Entering costs everything (Lk 18:29-30; Mt 13:44-46) but those who possess it have the only thing of any value. It is hard for the rich to enter (Mk 10:23-25), but it is presently occupied by many aware of their need of God (Mt 5:3,10; 11:11; Lk 7:28).

### **Declared and shared**

Those who have entered the kingdom have become followers of Jesus and to them has been granted the secrets (or 'mystery') of the kingdom (Mk 4:11; Lk 8:10; Mt 13:11). One of the fruits of this was Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Christ!" (Mk 8:29). However, not only were they within the embrace of the kingdom, but also they were to become its agents. They were given the 'keys of the Kingdom' (Mt 16:19; 18:18), opening and closing it to others. As they traveled from town to town those who encountered them 'came near to the kingdom of God' (Lk 10:8-12).

### **Coming consummation**

For all the references that emphasise the kingdom is 'now' there are as many that clearly refer to it as an eschatological event still to come; for example:

- There are references to a final judgment in which the righteous are separated from the wicked, like the shepherd dividing sheep from goats (Mt. 25:31-46);
- Not everyone who says 'Lord, now' will enter the kingdom, then (Mt 7:21);
- There will be a day when the peoples of east and west will be drawn into the kingdom which they will share with the patriarchs and prophets, there will however be some surprising exceptions (Mt 8:11-12; Lk 13:22-30);
- At the last supper Jesus speaks about the kingdom in future terms (Mk 14:25; Mt 26:26-29; Lk 22:14-18).

Jesus contrasts 'this age' (Mk 4:19; Lk 16:8; 20:34 etc) with 'the age to come' (Mk 10:30). Jesus talks of the 'consummation of this age' (Mt 24:3) the 'close of the age' when the Son of man comes to judge humanity and to separate the righteous from the wicked (cf Mt 13:37-43). Jesus promises to be with his disciples to 'the close of the age' (Mt 28:20). *Parousia* and 'judgment' are the marks that divide 'this age' from 'the age to come'.

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before the kingdom can enter them). Jesus is in their midst, so is the dynamic of the kingdom, defying human calculations. One greater than Solomon and Jonah is here (Lk 11:30-32)!



The role of Satan in this age also illustrates the tension between the kingdom present and future. In this age the evil one has permitted freedom and rules the kingdoms of this world (Lk 4:6). People must be saved from the perverted power (Mk 6:13), which is expressed in the bondage of disease (Lk 13:16). In the present the goods of Satan are being plundered (Mk 3:27), but final destruction lies in the future (Mk 1:24; Mat 8:29; 25:41 etc).

## Prophetic tension

Jesus' teaching about the future consummation of the kingdom presents us with some difficult scriptures to interpret. Typical of these is Mk 8:38-9:1 (cf Mt 16:27-28; Lk 9:26-27). Here he speaks of the future coming of the Son of man in his glory and the glory of his Father and of the holy angels; this leads immediately into statement, 'I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God!' What do we make of this scripture? :

- Some have argued that Jesus was quite mistaken about his ministry, believing the final consummation of the kingdom would come within the lifetime of his disciples; but he himself was adamant that no one knew 'the day or the hour' (Mt 24:36) 'the time or the season' (Acts 1:7);
- Others have interpreted the latter part of the passage in the light of the 'Transfiguration' (which immediately follows in the narrative), or the 'Resurrection' and 'Pentecost'. This is more satisfactory but does not do justice the eschatological force of the previous verse that sets the overall context.

The key lies in recognising that Jesus is speaking with classical prophetic perspective; the incarnation, transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and *parousia* are in a very real sense *one event*; just as the Hebrew prophet could speak of a particular historical judgment in terms of the eschatological day of the Lord: one redemptive event. In the same way Jesus spoke of the coming of the kingdom both present and future. The disciples of Jesus did see the kingdom come in power before they died, but not its consummation. Yet the eschatological consummation of God's kingdom is inseparable from and dependent upon what God is doing in the historical person and work of Jesus.

This prophetic perspective is also the key to the important 'Olivet Discourse' (Mk13; Mt 24; Lk 21) which interweaves the historical with the eschatological and which each Gospel writer reports with differing emphasis. We shall examine this together in a later session though all the difficulties may not be easily resolved.

## 'Already' but 'not yet'

The truth is, 'The kingdom is come, and yet the kingdom is still to come!' Our hope is both present and future. We await the final consummation of the full eschatological order of God's kingdom; nevertheless its powers have become dramatically active among humanity in the person and work of Jesus and through the Spirit. God the heavenly king, who will act tomorrow, is also acting today in Jesus. Present and future are visitations of the same God, manifestations of the same rule, to accomplish the same redemptive purpose. In fact from the incarnation to the *parousia* can be seen as one event, in which whosoever will may share.

## **GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM**

### **Words and works**

Jesus proclaimed the goodness of the kingdom of God in every word and act. His miracles were a dynamic demonstration of the powers of the age to come (Mat 11:11; 12:28; Lk 7:22), a 'sign' that the kingdom was present (Mk 8:12; Mt 12:39; Jn 2:11 and throughout the Gospel) and that the prophetic word is at work (cf Mk 11:12-14, 20-25; Mt 8:16; Mk 4:39). His words came in rabbinic style teaching (Mt 5-7) but with an authority of their own, in the terse phrase in reply to a situation, in question and answer, or in the brilliantly constructed parable of which he was the master. Each uncovered some fresh aspect of the kingdom and together wove a most complete and comprehensive picture for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. We can only highlight some of the central features.

### **Good news to the poor**

To Jesus the good news being preached to the poor was one of the supreme signs of the kingdom (Mt 11:5). By the time of Jesus 'the poor' had come to mean more than just the materially poor. In quoting from Isaiah 61 they were the broken hearted, captives, prisoners those who mourn; in fact all who are powerless. It also included those who were open and faithful to God (eg Ps 70:4; 40:17; 109:31). For Jesus they also included the 'sinners' (those who had given up on religion), prostitutes, and tax collectors. Those locked into inferiority, the sick, widows, orphans, those dependent upon the charity of others. There was a rabbinical saying, 'four things are compared to a dead man; the lame, the blind, the leper and the childless'. Towards all these was the message of the kingdom of God fully focused.

### **Binding Satan**

The good news of the kingdom was no mere teaching; it was a sovereign in breaking of God, a divine act in time and space. This was supremely illustrated by the binding and casting out of Satan. It is to this fact that the attention of all Jesus' critics was directed, 'If I by the Spirit of God cast out Satan, then the kingdom of God is come upon you' (Mt 12:28). The strong man is being bound and his goods spoiled (Mt 12:29), he is being stripped of the armour in which he trusts (Lk 11:21-22). The Hebrew expectation was that the Messiah would free Israel from her enemies; Jesus reinterprets the prophetic hope in terms of a spiritual, rather than a military, conflict. Satan was the chief enemy of God. The Hebrew expectation was that the Messiah would bring deliverance to the Jews as a nation. In Jesus Satanic power is broken, signaling the total destruction of Satan and his angels in eternal fire (Mt 25:41) at the coming of the Son of man. Thus it is with joy Jesus exclaims, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Lk 10:18) at the return of the seventy. But neither exorcism nor spiritual victories are the final goals of God's kingdom, but life possessed by the power of God. Beware of the vacuum (Mt 12:43-45); rejoice that your names are written in heaven (Lk 10:20).

### **Character of the kingdom**

Quite simply, the kingdom is the 'kingdom of God', so the character and nature of the kingdom is none other than the character and nature of God. The first truth is that those





who submit to God as king find that a Father, 'Abba' (cf Mk 14:36; Mt 6:9 etc) that loving title that only members of the family use. Time and again it is called the 'Father's kingdom' (Mt 13:43; 25:34; 26:29). It is God's joy to bestow the kingdom as a gift (Lk 12:32). It is quite clear that 'kingship' and 'fatherhood' are closely related concepts. As the character of the kingdom is explained we see that its hallmark is 'grace', 'that extravagant goodness of God'. This is not only illustrated in the miracles of healing that freely released people who receive a full day's pay (Mt 20:1-5); the debtor released (Lk 7:41-43); the banquet for beggars and vagabonds (Lk 14:16-24); the pursuing shepherd, the searching woman, and the waiting father (Lk 15). The hand that reaches out with forgiveness (Mk 2:5,10,15-17; Mt 18:23-27; Lk 7:36-50) is dealing with the past as a basis for a new start. This is the heart of the king of the kingdom. But the love must be responded to and the grace can be refused. There is an 'edge' to the kingdom, those who reject its open offer of forgiveness and new life must stand under the king's judgment (Mt 25:31-46; Mk 3:29; Mt 18:6 etc).

### **Demands of the kingdom**

The good news of the kingdom demands a response, and the response makes demands upon the hearer. Firstly, we are confronted with the presence and urgency of the kingdom, the time is 'now' (Mk 1:15), one's present response is the conditioning factor. Like the rich fool, 'Tonight your soul may be required of you' (Lk 12:16-20). Like the maidens waiting to be part of the wedding party one must be ready and prepared 'now' (Mt 25:1-13). Notice how Jesus takes the Hebrew hope for the people in the future and transfers it onto the individual now, with laser sharpness. For the individual now, this is the Day of the Lord; if I want to be part of the future consummation I must come under God's rule now; live now as I will have to do then, 'keeping loins girded and my lamps burning' (Lk 12:35) for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour (Lk 12:40).

Those who respond to the kingdom must become like 'little children' (Mk 10:14-15; Mt 18:1-5). It requires a whole change of mind, ready not only to make a new start but also to learn from scratch again; this is repentance. We all stand guilty before God (Lk 13:2-3; Mt 5:25-26); it is dying to self, 'taking up the cross' (Mk 8:34-35). Being prepared to lose an eye than go to hell (Mk 9:47). It requires renunciation; which may be money (Mk 10:17-31), security (Mt 6:24-34), prestige (Mat 23:5-12); family and friends (Lk 14:26), having no place to rest (Lk 9:58), suffering and rejection, (Mk 9:31) a life given in service (Mk 10:45). Whether one stumbles on to it like a treasure seeker, or searches for it like a pearl merchant, the response must be the same, total abandon of all else to obtain it (Mt 13:44-46).

The other side of repentance has been beautifully described as 'learning to say Abba again' and trusting in the grace of God. Alongside childlikeness the kingdom makes other demands, the need to count the cost (Lk 14:28-32) and a shrewd resourcefulness (Lk 16:1-8). It is those with a violent appetite for God who enters it ahead of the rest (Mt 11:12).

### **Paradox of the kingdom**

The coming of the kingdom in the person of Jesus was a mystery and paradox on every sense. It was a closed secret to all but those who were initiated into it, it was the greatest event in history and yet Jesus continually forbade the news to get out (cf Mk 1:24,25,44),



not until he made his public declaration before the High Priest was his cover completely blown (Mk 14:62-63). It overthrew all the expectations of the day and presented a new order of things. 'Happy are those who weep now...' (Lk 6:20-25), 'the first shall be last' (Lk 13:30) revealed to children not theologians (Mt 11:25-26). It brought the social justice the prophets longed for but by spiritual release not political revolution, the call was to respond to what God is doing. Judgment was beginning now by reclaiming for God every area of human life; Jesus' miracles overcame disease, death, demons, shortage of food, restored the leper to society; it tore down the state system, attacked commercial exploitation in the Temple, and the stifling restrictions of the Law by healing on the Sabbath. The Jew looked for the kingdom to break into history and establish God's rule, Jesus said it was here already working unseen like yeast hidden in the dough (Lk 13:20-21). It may appear insignificant like a mustard seed but it would grow beyond all phenomenally (Mk 4:30-32).

## **CRISIS OF THE KINGDOM**

### **Towards Jerusalem**

The whole of Jesus' life moves towards a climax that is central to the coming of the kingdom. He 'sets his face towards Jerusalem' (Lk 9:51,53), where he spends some final time with his followers, is arrested, put on trial and crucified and buried, yet three days later rises again (Mk 8:31; 9:12,31; 10:33 etc). This is the event that concentrates Jesus' attention (Mk 10:38; Lk 12:50).

Reflecting on this story calls for thinking and understanding at two levels, which run in parallel with each other:

- On one hand we have a series of historical events that are weighed down with passion, anguish, betrayal, deceit, excruciating suffering and painful death, followed by despair, disbelief and then inexpressible joy.
- On the other hand Jesus' own words and later Christian understanding see these same events as having profound spiritual and cosmic implications, which still defy a full understanding of their depth.

These two perspectives must be held in tension throughout our reflections.

### **Servant, Son and King**

Among the different expectations that the Jews of Jesus' day had, on one thing they were agreed – whoever or whatever their coming anointed leader was to be, that person would be triumphant, victorious in establishing God's rule and they would not die.

Jesus both embraces this understanding, but at the same time turns it on its head! In explaining this, before demonstrating it, Jesus seems to draw on two ancient biblical ideas:<sup>10</sup> the 'Suffering Servant' (Isa 53) and the 'Son of Man' (Dan 7):<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> We are fully aware of the debate among scholars around this topic.

<sup>11</sup> This is Jesus' favourite title for himself, used 81 times in the Gospels. Rooted in Daniel 7:13-14 it presents an eschatological figure involved in the consummation of God's kingdom



“The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve,  
and to give his life a ransom for many”  
(Mk 10:45)

This is a profoundly new dimension to the concept of the kingdom. Through Jesus' death and resurrection a new experience of liberation ('ransom') awaits humanity. The final eschatological consummation is not only linked with what God is doing in history in Jesus, but most especially in his death and resurrection.

Notice that the title 'Son of man' and 'kingdom of God' are never used together, because in fact they are interchangeable; the 'Son of man' is invested with 'the kingdom'.

Notice that as Jesus' life moves towards its climax all the events are spoken about in kingdom terms and against the backdrop of the final consummation:

- As Jesus rides into Jerusalem he fulfils the prophetic promise, 'behold your King comes to you riding on an ass' (Isa 62: 11; Zec 9:9; cf. Mt 21:5), with the crowd shouting the words of a Messianic Psalm (Ps 118:26; cf Lk 19:38);
- At the last supper the cup represents the 'blood of covenant (anticipated in Jer 31:31-34) at the price of his own blood. Jesus would not have wine again until the final eschatological consummation (Mk 14:24-25; Mt 26:29; Lk 22:16);
- After Jesus' arrest the only evidence he would submit towards his case was that his accusers would see him as the Son of man 'seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mk 14:62);
- At the trial Pilate questions the nature of Jesus' kingship [Jn 18:37-38], the soldiers mock him as 'King of the Jews' (Mt 27:29). His name on the cross is 'Jesus, king of the Jews' (Mt 27:37). The crowd challenged him to come down on the basis of his kingship (Mt 27:42). The thief asks to be remembered when he comes into his kingdom (Lk 23:42);
- At Jesus' resurrection there was the demonstration of his rule and conquest over death, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (Lk 24:5).
- The circumstances of his ascension, being carried into heaven amid clouds (Lk 24:51; Acts 1:9), fulfill perfectly the imagery of the Son of man (Dan 7:13) with the promise that he 'will come in the same manner as you saw him go' (Acts 1:11). Thus the resurrection and ascension vindicate the king in the eyes of his people, and the final eschatological consummation will vindicate him in the eyes of all nations.

## **Atonement as cosmic**

“Do not weep.  
See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, ... has conquered ...  
Then I saw ... a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered”  
(Rev 5:5-6)

We are confronted by a brutal execution outside the walls of Jerusalem, designed to make an example of those who are seen to threaten political stability. It is pitiless, ruthless and calculating. But Jesus' crucifixion in this bleak moment in history is seen by Christians to have cosmic significance and universal in its implications. The atoning work of Jesus

embraces sub-atomic particles, plus the circumference of the cosmos, and everything in between.

During his incarnation Jesus identified with those he came to save; with sinners in his baptism (Lk 3:21), and 'with the wild animals' in the wilderness (Mk1:13). – Remember that the 'baptism of the Spirit' referred to at Jesus' baptism is the baptism, in re-birthing fire, of the whole cosmos! Jesus does not just die for people but for the whole of creation.

Jesus makes it clear that his crucifixion has universal and cosmic implications:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, *will draw all things* to myself”  
(Jn 12:32)

Paul makes it clear we are talking about a cosmic and universal atonement:

‘... through (Jesus) to reconcile to himself *all things* ...  
making peace (*shalom*) by the blood of his cross’  
(Col 1:20)

‘The creation itself will be set free from its bondage and decay  
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’  
(Rm 8:21)

The very act of crucifixion, at the epicentre of the atonement, symbolises that Jesus' death embraces the totality of humanity and creation:

- The cross is a stake driven deep into the earth, through soil and rock;
- The cross-piece stands high above the earth, against the sky;
- The cross often spoken of as a 'tree' is both rooted and branching.

Listen to Matthew's description of the crucifixion:

‘From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon ... The earth shook, the rocks were split. The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.’  
(Mt 27:45-51-52)

This is the language of the end of the world, which at the same time heralds-in the beginning of the new heaven and earth. At the moment of death there is both resurrection and re-creation.

Jesus dying words, “It is finished!” in Hebrew may well have been *shalem* the verbal form of *shalom*.

## Resurrection as pivotal

‘Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,  
and that he was buried,  
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures’

(1Cor 15:3-4)

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the foundation stone for a Christian understanding of hope. It is absolutely pivotal. If Jesus' resurrection is not true then the faith and the hope crumble to dust:

'If Christ has not been raised,  
your faith is futile and you are still in your sins'  
(1Cor 15:17)

The resurrection of Jesus is accepted as a reality, it is proclaimed and not explained by the early Christian community – it is a mystery and a miracle. It is either boldly declared or clearly assumed by every New Testament writer.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?  
He is not here, but has risen"  
(Lk 24:5)

The physical details are clearly recorded by each of the gospel traditions. The dead body buried (Lk 23:50-53), the earthquake and the stunned guards (Mt 28:2-4), the tombstone flung aside (Mk 16:4), the grave-clothes but no body (Jn 20:5-6), the encounters with the risen Jesus (cf. Jn 20:11-21:14 *et al*) and his very physical presence (Lk 24:39-43).

Jesus' resurrection is *the* eschatological symbol. It is the sign of the ultimate victory over, sin, death and *hades*, breaking their power for ever:

"I am the first and the last, and the living one.  
I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever;  
and I have the keys of Death and of Hades"  
(Rev 1:17-18) <sup>12</sup>

In his death Jesus descends into the place of the dead: *sheol* (Heb) or *hades* (Gk); and there he proclaims his victory and triumph!

'(Jesus) was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,  
in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison ...'  
'For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead,  
so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged,  
they might live in the spirit as God does'  
(1Pt 3:18-19; 4:6) <sup>13</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus is an act of God, the demonstration of divine power:

'Now may the God of peace,  
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus'  
(Heb 13:20) <sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See also Rm 6:9; 1Cor 15:20-28

<sup>13</sup> See also Rm 10:7; Eph 4:9-10; Acts 2:24-32

<sup>14</sup> See also Acts 2:24, 32; Rm 6:4; 1Cor 15:15; 1Pt 1:21



So the resurrection is the keystone of Christian hope, the demonstration of the nature and the power of the kingdom and the means by which the ultimate unification of all things in *shalom* takes place:

‘But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead,  
the first fruits of those who have died.  
For since death came through a human being,  
the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ...  
Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.  
Then comes the end,  
when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father,  
after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.  
For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.  
The last enemy to be destroyed is death.  
For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet’ ...  
When all things are subjected to him,  
then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one  
who put all things in subjection under him,  
so that God may be all in all’  
(1Cor 15:20-28)

## Questions & Reflections

1. What is the significance of Jesus’ use of the phrase ‘Kingdom of God’? Why did it create a crisis for his hearers?
2. How do the biblical visions of *shalom* and the ‘kingdom’ relate to each other?
3. What is the significance of Jesus’ resurrection? What is its relationship to a Christian understanding of hope and ‘the end’? What ought to be the practical consequences of Jesus resurrection in the lives of individual Christians and their communities of faith today?

## Reading and Resources

*Key books:*

R Bauckham & T Hart **‘Hope Against Hope’** Darton, Longman & Todd 1999

JB Green (Ed et al) **‘Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels’** IVP 1992: article: ‘Kingdom of God’ / Heaven by CC Caragounis p 417-430

G MacDonald **‘The Evangelical Universalist’** SPCK 2008

NT Wright **‘New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope’** Grove Books 1999

NT Wright **‘The Resurrection of the Son of God’** SPCK 2003

P Yoder **‘Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace’** Life & Faith Press 1987

*Other useful book resources:*

- J Alison '**Living in the End Times**' SPCK 1997  
CE Armerding & WW Gasque (Ed) '**Handbook of Biblical Prophecy**' Baker 1977  
W Barclay '**A Spiritual Autobiography**' Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977  
R Bauckham '**Jude & 2 Peter**' Word 1983  
R Bauckham '**The Theology of the Book of Revelation**' Cambridge 1993  
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N Cohn '**The Pursuit of the Millennium**' Temple Smith 1970  
DN Freedman (Ed) '**Anchor Bible Dictionary**' Vol:3 Doubleday 1992 see article T Prendergast 'Hope' p 284  
DN Freedman (Ed) '**Anchor Bible Dictionary**' Vol:5 Doubleday 1992 see articles:
  - Eschatology by DL Petersen p 575
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- JB Green [Ed et al] '**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**' IVP 1992: articles:
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BD McLaren '**The Secret Message of Jesus**' Thomas Nelson 2006  
RH Mounce '**The Book of Revelation**' Eerdmans 1977  
R Parry & C Partridge (Eds) '**Universal Salvation?**' Paternoster 2003  
A Richardson (Ed) '**A Theological Word Book of the Bible**' see article 'Hope' London SCM Press 1965 p 108-109  
The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, '**The Mystery of Salvation**' London, Church House Publishing, 1995  
D Thompson '**The End of Time**' Minerva 1997  
Walter Wink '**Engaging the Powers**' Fortress Press 1992  
NT Wright '**The New Testament and the People of God**' SPCK 1992  
NT Wright '**Jesus and the Victory of God**' SPCK 1996  
NT Wright '**Surprised by Hope**' SPCK 2007  
PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) '**The Meaning of Peace**' (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed) IMS Elkhart 2001