

Proper 28 C 2022 RCL
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Psalm 98; Luke 21:5-19
Rev. Dr. Adam T. Trambley
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St. John's Sharon
The Kingdom of Heaven

Last week, some folks in the parish asked about “The Kingdom of Heaven”. I would always rather talk about things that matter to people than things that I think matter to people, so today we’ll look at the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God. Both terms are used by Jesus in different gospels and they mean the same. We’ll see what the Kingdom refers to, and the invitation for us to enter it through the person of Jesus Christ.

We regularly talk about the Kingdom when we say the Lord’s Prayer. We say, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done” and we end with a doxology “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.” The most basic definition of the Kingdom of Heaven is that realm in which God’s will is done. Where God’s will is done means that God rules in those places and those places are part of his Kingdom. This Kingdom, in fact, turns out to be a pretty expansive place.

The Kingdom of Heaven includes that area we often think about as “heaven”. The Kingdom of Heaven includes the reality we will experience after death and after the final resurrection when Jesus has fully and finally conquered sin and death and where we are with all our loved ones in the fuller presence of God. Yet this real existence outside of our time in this life is but a part of God’s Kingdom, and not the most immediate way we experience the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven also includes the entire natural world that follows the providential ordering of its Divine Creator. When things fall due to gravity, they are following the will of God in the Kingdom of Heaven. When nuclear fusion in the heart of stars sheds light into the universe, atomic particles are following the will of God in the Kingdom of Heaven. When plants take sunlight and carbon dioxide and photosynthesize it into oxygen and sugar, they are following the will of God in the Kingdom of Heaven. The numerous miracles that allow our bodies to work at all, from hearts pumping and blood circulating to breathing to creating countless enzymes to make things function to the complex inner working of various cells, all of these occur as part of the will of God in the Kingdom of Heaven. This Kingdom of Heaven is all around us and part of our existence right now. When we talk about finding God in nature, part of what we are experiencing is the glory of God manifest in that part of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In fact, just about the only place the Kingdom of Heaven is not fully present right now is where God has given us the capacity to rule over our own Kingdoms. Here I will just acknowledge that “Kingdom” is a somewhat limited word here. Obviously women would rule over Queendoms, perhaps, and in America we have a negative understanding of Kingdoms tracing back to some unpleasantries with George III a couple hundred year ago. Maybe “realm” would be a better word, but I’ll use Kingdom since it is familiar to us from scripture and I trust we understand it as we need to. The important thing is that we all have our own Kingdoms or realms, and just like the Kingdom of God is where God’s will is done, our own Kingdoms are where our will is done.

We are the rightful rulers of our Kingdoms. God has given us authority over a certain sphere of our existence. Being persons means that we are meant to have control over our realm. As individuals, we are given authority at the very least over our bodies, our wills, our imaginations, and a certain amount of activity that involves relationships with other people and the world around us. When others remove our capacity to make decisions over the kingdoms that God has given us, those are sins committed against us which restrict the dignity God has given us as persons.

Our own responsibility in the governance of our Kingdoms is also why substances that remove our capacity to make reasoned decisions are so problematic. Just because we are under the influence does not remove our responsibility for decision-making in our God-bestowed realms.

God has also given human beings collective Kingdoms to rule. All humanity is given dominion over nature. Various groups of people are given authority over their own societies, institutions, and governments. Wherever humans can exercise their free will is a sphere that God has turned over to one or more of us.

Of course, there is a problem with all of our own individual and collective human Kingdoms. We were given our Kingdoms so that we could rule in relationship with God. Looking at the book of Genesis we read about how God created us in a relationship with each other that had respect and dignity and how human beings were given dominion over creation while God walked in the garden and talked to them.

Then human beings decided they were going to run their own Kingdoms separate from God, thank you very much. These decisions created a rift in our relationship with God. As we ruled our individual and collective realms, mostly our selfishness and brokenness set us on destructive paths. Throughout the Old Testament, we read about God trying to get our attention and provide a law that would instruct people how to align their Kingdoms with the Kingdom of God. All of that divine outreach had some good moments, but people mostly ignored it.

Then God sent Jesus Christ, and Jesus offered something new. Jesus came proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. As God and as a human being, he ruled his own human Kingdom with a will that was one-hundred percent in line with the will of his Father. As the Son of God, he also is the one through whom all things came to be and who is responsible for sustaining the entire created order, and thereby rules the Kingdom of God, as well. Through his life, he provided a way for all of us to being to experience the Kingdom of Heaven more fully.

Jesus invites us to enter the Kingdom of Heaven in two ways. Both of these ways involve us living more and more of our life where God's will is done. Where God's will is done is not necessarily a different place, but involves carving out places and times and decisions in our lives where what we do and experience is what God would have us do and experience. Both of the Jesus' invitations involve deepening our relationship with him, as he brings the fullness of God's Kingdom in his person.

Jesus' first invitation is to accept the healing power of God in our lives, so that our experience of this life is part of the life of the Kingdom, even amid the world's brokenness. Ultimately, what

we mean by salvation is the capacity to experience the presence and power of God in the midst of our pain and suffering, whether caused by our own sin or by sins done to us. Accepting God's salvation means that we begin right now to understand the peace that passes this world's understanding, and the love of being children of God, and the joy of seeing God's presence all around us. Such experiences are God's will for us. The Kingdom breaking into our lives means that we experience these blessings, even when the world would tell us we are cursed. Remember what Jesus said in the beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit, and the meek, and the sorrowful, and those hungering and thirsting for righteousness sake, and the peacemakers, and the pure in heart. These folks aren't blessed because someday things will get better for them and they will inherit the earth. They are blessed because in this very moment they are experiencing the Kingdom of God breaking into their lives as they understand and accept who God is, even though their circumstances seem to remain the same. Later there will be a judgment and a reversal that benefits them, but in the here and now they are blessed as children of God in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The second invitation of Jesus to enter the Kingdom of God is to align our wills with God's will as we rule in our own Kingdoms. We do this by heeding Jesus teaching and following his example. Jesus tells us again and again what the life of the Kingdom is like. We can summarize this teaching and example by saying that we need to love God and love neighbor. Jesus provides much more detail, however, detail that we can spend a lifetime living into. We hear the teachings on conversion of heart in the Sermon on the Mount, which go beyond simply doing the right thing to having the love of God in our hearts for one another. We can also listen and ponder the parables where Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God is like..." and then tells a story. We have heard many of these in the past few months on Sunday morning as we have read through Luke's gospel this year. We also have Jesus example of self-sacrificial love, laying down his life for his friends. Living more fully into Jesus' teaching and example is the work of discipleship. As we live out our discipleship, our wills align more with God's will, and the decisions we make for our Kingdoms come closer to God's will for them. Such correspondence with God's will allows others to experience aspects of the Kingdom of God through us. We are also then able to work with others so that our collective decisions can be more in-line with the will of God. Such discipleship and cooperation is the only way we can solve the larger scale problems that beset us, especially those crises resulting from selfish decisions human beings have made in the past. We can experience the Kingdom of Heaven more fully as a society or a church as our collective decisions are the ones that God would want us to make.

The core message of Jesus' preaching was that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. This Kingdom is present all around us in much of the natural order, as well as in the heavenly places. This Kingdom also finds its fullness in the work and person of Jesus Christ who offers us an invitation to live our lives in God's Kingdom. By entering a deeper relationship with Jesus we can experience a greater fullness of God's love, joy and peace in our lives, while also learning to follow his teachings and example so that our own Kingdoms are united into his. This life of the Kingdom, beginning right now, is the life that we were created for. The life of the Kingdom of Heaven is so much better than life in any other Kingdom, including that of our own Kingdom when we have separated it from God's. Accept Jesus' invitation and live into the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven.