SOME THOUGHTS ON THE KINGDOM

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However, despite the problems with the Enlightenment worldview, the Christian church has gone along with parts of it. We have allowed the church to be squeezed into the margins and we accept the division of life into sacred and secular in many areas of life without questioning it.
Category: Observations

These are the rough notes that I used for a devotional which I led for a group of colleagues on the theme of the Kingdom of God. They are not fully polished, so don't pick too many holes in them!

Theme The Kingdom

Â â€œThe time promised by God has come at last!â€ Â he announced.Â â€œThe Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!â€ (Mark 1:15)

The key theme of Jesus ministry was The Kingdom of God, (or the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew).

It is easy for us to get tied up trying to understand exactly what the Kingdom of God means, but in simple terms it means that God is King. Jesus was proclaiming that God is ruling; he is in charge.

In The C1 Jewish Context

For his original hearers, this was great news. The last half millennium had been pretty rough for the Jewish nation. They had been carted off to exile in Babylon for 70 years. They had returned to their land, but had been occupied by the Greeks and now the Romans. The great days of Israel were long behind them.

Perhaps the most important symbol of Israelâ€™s state was found in the strange vision in Ezekiel 10. Itâ€™s easy to get lost in the details of flying wheels and cherubim in this passage, but there is one key thought. Godâ€™s glory left the Temple. Since the days in the tabernacle in the desert, God was present with his people as the shekinah glory in the most holy place â€“ but in Ezekiel 10, he left them. The people had broken his covenant and the glory left the temple.

Though the Temple was rebuilt on the return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah, the glory never returned. God was still absent. For NT Wright, it is as though Israel were still in exile, even though they had returned to their own country.

The country was in a febrile state, waiting for the Messiah who would usher in the age when God would return to Israel, to rule the world and to re-establish Israel to its rightful place as the leading nation.

In this context, when Jesus said that God was King, it could only have one meaning. People heard his words through their grid of Israelâ€™s backstory.

However, right from the start, Jesus confused the people; he talked about a hidden kingdom that would grow slowly until the grain and chaff were separated at the final judgement. The Kingdom would start off like the smallest seed, but would eventually be the biggest tree. This did not fit the accepted view of God bursting on the scene and zapping Israelâ€™s enemies.

When the people gave Jesus a royal escort into Jerusalem, he didnâ€™t ride on a war horse, he

rode on a donkey. And he wasnâ€™t riding towards a golden throne, he was riding to a cross.

Of course, the problem was they got it wrong. In Jesus, God did return to the Temple, but in judgement and challenge, not in order to establish Israelâ€™s pre-eminence in the world.

They had not really understood the full meaning of their own history. Israel was chosen by God to be a blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-3). Godâ€™s Kingdom was far more extensive than Jesusâ€™ contemporaries ever grasped; and it was of a very different nature.

The Kingdom that Jesus preached was the culmination of the Israel story, alright. Christ came to gather Israel together as a witnessing community who would take the message of the Kingdom out into the world, drawing both Jews and Gentiles into Godâ€™s reign.

The Kingdom was established not through force of arms, but through the death of Christ and the power of the Spirit who brought him back from the grave. The Triune God is reconciling all things in heaven and earth, through Christ. But the Kingdom grows slowly as a new creation comes into being.

John doesnâ€™t use the Kingdom terminology, but he captures the reality of this new situation where the reign of God breaks into the world. We are all familiar with the echoes of the creation story in the prologue to Johnâ€™s Gospel. This would, of course, ring even more true to the original readers. Then through the Gospel, John mentions seven miracles and seven major discourses â€“ seven days â€“ a week.

Then in John 20:1, we read that it was the first day of the week, when Jesus rose again. John highlights the day â€“ a new week. A new world, a new act of creation. God rested in the grave on the seventh day, but on the first day creation restarted.

The Kingdom that Jesus came to announce wasnâ€™t simply that God was going to reign by proxy through Israel, but that he was going to bring about a new heaven and earth through the death and resurrection of Christ. A heaven and earth in which Godâ€™s reign would be worked out perfectly over time.

The sad thing is that so many of the Jews of Jesus day failed to see this and get on board with it.

They missed out on the Kingdom because it didnâ€™t fit the way in which they looked at the world. So what about us? Do we understand the Kingdom, or does our worldview get in the way?

Our Context

So what is the worldview of our society?

In truth, we are at a time of flux, modernism may be giving way to post-modernism, or then again it may not. However, at the moment our worldview is still dominated by the Enlightenment of the C17

and C18. The key features of an Enlightenment worldview are:

- It is essentially a secular version of the Christian faith. Humanity is moving towards a paradise constructed through human effort.
- Salvation is found in human ability â€“ especially in the areas of science and technology.
- Human reason and scientific method can answer all of the questions that matter.
- Because human reason is sufficient, there is no place for religion in the public space and so it is relegated to the margins of life and to the private sphere.
- Truth is found in propositional statements that can be measured and evaluated.

Obviously, Jesusâ€™ message of the Kingdom contradicts this worldview head on. We are not moving towards a paradise of human creation, but a new heaven and earth under the rule of God. Human ability can do a great deal â€“ we are created in the image of God, after all. However, our technological prowess can do nothing about the alienation and emptiness at the heart of the human condition.

However, despite the problems with the Enlightenment worldview, the Christian church has gone along with parts of it. We have allowed the church to be squeezed into the margins and we accept the division of life into sacred and secular in many areas of life without questioning it.

However, the Kingdom has no place for a sacred/secular divide. If there are parts of life which are outside of Godâ€™s purview then he isnâ€™t King. Itâ€™s as simple as that. There is no part of our life, our work or our world, which doesnâ€™t belong to God. The idea that there is no place for the church in politics is an enlightenment value, but itâ€™s not one that we should along with. However, Evangelicals have often accepted this proposition by seeing salvation and mission as being purely spiritual endeavours, related to getting people into heaven without any real relevance to life on this earth.

The notion of truth is an interesting one. Truth in our society is something that can be measured and verified. If you canâ€™t put a ruler up against it and say how long it is, then you canâ€™t measure it. This is something we have gone along with in general. Itâ€™s an accepted view in our society that we tend not to challenge. The way in which we have a proliferation of creation versus evolution books is one example of this. We attempt to justify Scripture on the basis of Enlightenment views of truth. While there is some value in this, I would argue that it is a fundamental category mistake. In the Kingdom, truth is not defined in human terms by what we can measure. It is God who determines truth and who communicates it to us. In the Kingdom, truth is historical (rooted in Godâ€™s acts), personal (relieved in Jesus) and narratival (expressed in a story which is true for all).

This isnâ€™t to say that there isnâ€™t some sort of truth in 1+1=2, but there is more to life than those sorts of questions. The Enlightenment view is that questions about the meaning of life have no provable answer and so should not be asked. The Kingdom tells us otherwise.

Questions

- To what extent is there a sacred/secular divide in our work? What can we do about it? Is the way we run meetings (starting with devotions) an implicit support for this worldview?
- The enlightenment view is that there is an inherent value and strength in technology and human advancement and that advanced (western) societies should help fix the rest of the world. If God is King, then any notions of superior human structures are redundant. Do we have any enlightenment attitudes in how we go about our work?
- Much strategic planning methodology relies on the implication that certain inputs will produce specific outputs. These are scientific/enlightenment values, not necessarily those of the Kingdom. Is there any sense in which we need to address our reliance on these sorts of methodologies?