

Heaven Is Near (Part One)

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”

Reflection 3 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

In our new series “The Last Great New Command” I turn to the theme “Heaven Is Near” and draw from a text in Matthew 4:12-17. Jesus has just been tempted by the devil in the desert, and now he returns to Galilee, to his home region, to “Galilee of the Gentiles,” as the text says. It was surrounded by non-Jews: Phoenicians, Syrians, and Samaritans. It was on the great trade route from Damascus to Egypt. It had often been invaded; in the eighth century BC the Assyrians had deported many of the northern Israelites, and repopulated the Galilee with foreigners. It was traditionally the place in Israel most open to a new teacher with a new message.

So (in verse 17, we read) Jesus began to preach, and this was his message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near, or the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” It was incidentally the exact same message John the Baptist preached (Matthew 3:1). And it’s the same message Jesus later told his disciples to preach (Matthew 10:7). In fact, it’s what Jesus always talked about; the stories he told according to Matthew, Mark and Luke were primarily about the kingdom of God.

Even the Book of Acts is all about the kingdom of God. It begins with Jesus after his resurrection appearing over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (1:3). It ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome boldly and without hindrance preaching the kingdom of God (28:31). And in between that’s what everyone was preaching.

Then sometime or other we quit. At least something like that happened. In any case, the result is that 2000 years later the whole notion of the kingdom of God confuses people. Sometimes we think it refers to Heaven, our life with God after death, perhaps in part because the Gospel of Matthew always calls it the kingdom of heaven. For the record, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are synonymous. Matthew has kingdom of heaven perhaps because of Jewish reticence over using the name of God; Mark, Luke and John have kingdom of God.

But often people suppose it to mean Heaven, so that when Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20), some suppose that unless we’re more righteous than Pharisees, we’ll not make it to Heaven. Or when Jesus told Nicodemus (in John 3:3-5) that no one can see or enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again, some assume no one makes it to Heaven unless they’re born again.

Jesus, however, had something a bit different in mind when he spoke of the kingdom of God, and, in fact, the most obvious thing about the kingdom of God is that it is something that happens there-and-then with Jesus, and here-and-now with us. So Jesus told the crowds in his day, “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death

before they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1). And he once told the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you (or among you)” (Luke 17:20-21).

So what Jesus is saying in our text this morning is not “Repent, or you’ll go to Hell,” though that might be one way to draw a crowd, a particular kind of crowd. And when he says “Repent” he does not strictly mean in sackcloth and ashes, though for some this might be appropriate. What he is saying is, “Repent. Change. Come to your own personal turning point. Reorient your life. Reverse your life’s direction, because heaven’s reign on earth is near. In fact, it’s all around you.”

On one level, Jesus is answering the central question of his time. The Jewish people of his time expect God’s kingdom to come. They expect God to send a Messiah to liberate them from Rome. They expect that Messiah to tell them to take up arms and march on Jerusalem. But Jesus says something very, very different. It could hardly be more different. Israel longs for God’s kingdom to come (Matthew 5:3). She is ready to work and struggle and fight for it. But Jesus says that the people to whom it belongs are the poor in spirit. Israel thirsts for justice (Matthew 5:6), but the justice Jesus offers does not come by fighting your enemies. It is not the way of anger, of that claim of “justice” that really means vengeance. It is the way of humility and gentleness, of peace-making, of turning the other cheek when struck, of trusting and forgiving and serving and loving.

Jesus is calling his listeners to a radically different way of being Israel in its real-life Palestinian situation. He knows that their aggressive nationalism will lead to national calamity. So on one level, he is trying to head off the destruction of Jerusalem – their own 9/11. And he suggests a completely different way. The soldier who commandeers the services of a Galilean villager must not be resisted or resented; he must be met with astonishing generosity: “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (Matthew 5:41). Enemies of the state are not enemies in the eyes of God (Matthew 5:44ff.). The true people of God practice love and mercy, and above all, they do not make common cause with the resistance movement, with those who only know to respond to violence with violence. They are, in fact, to love their enemies.

When Jesus welcomes people into the kingdom of heaven, he is calling them to the last great new command – to learn to live a life of love – and he is thereby inviting them into a new world, a world larger and kinder than the one they had been born into. And that’s what God offers to all of us, to all people everywhere throughout the ages. This is what he always does. He takes us where we are in our fears and narrowness, and he invites us into a world that is larger and kinder.

– Dale Pauls