

This week what stood out to me was that Jesus sent out his disciples not to proclaim that the people must quit sinning and be saved, or become a part of the Jesus “Fan-club”; what he sent them out to proclaim was that the “kingdom of God has drawn near.” That’s the message of their mission: “The kingdom of God has drawn near...”

And, I’d been reading a book called “The Logic of Evangelism” in which the author’s thesis is that in our evangelism we’re not just to focus on proclaiming the message that we can go to heaven if we repent... Evangelism is about doing all those things that draw people into the community of God’s Kingdom... So when I read this bit about the disciples being sent to proclaim God’s kingdom it struck a note with me.

And it did that thing that happens every now and again: it made me stop and ask myself, “You’ve read, and heard, and prayed, and preached those words a hundred times... but do you really know what they mean? Do you have any kind of a clear idea of what Jesus and the disciples and authors of these scriptures meant when they talked about, ‘the kingdom of God’?” And I found my brain wallowing in search of an answer... So I decided to take some time to study it, because apparently this is what we disciples are supposed to be proclaiming.

So I went through the Bible and found 145 separate texts in which the use of “kingdom” speaks directly or indirectly about the kingdom—or reign—of God. And I chased those texts down and printed them out and studied them to see what I could make of this “kingdom of God” thing... And here’s what struck me:

Physically, we live in a worldly kingdom. We live in a world ruled by humans according to human logic; a world that values things based on our human nature and desires. We live in a world that elevates the physical above the spiritual, the observable above the invisible, the logical above the mysterious, the now above the past or future. We live in a world—and now I’m speaking about us in particular, in our time and context—that is materialistic, individualistic, self-absorbed and self-serving. We live in a world where it is seen as commonplace—and perhaps even enviable—for the rich to get richer as the poor get poorer, for the marginal to be overlooked, for the “other” to be despised and demonized, for inconvenient and even potentially catastrophic truths to be swept under the rug, and for others—in general—to be used and discarded in order to give us more money, more pleasure, more leisure, more whatever...

And each of us has a place in the pecking order of this kingdom... And we all seem to assume that the happenstance of our birth into places of relative power and privilege gives us the right to long for places higher-up the ladder—even as we abuse those lower down in order to get us there. And because this is the way of this worldly kingdom, we set up the rules and traditions and systems and governments that uphold this kingdom... for our own sakes.

But this kingdom stands in conflict with the kingdom of our God. And throughout the scriptures what we see is the kingdom of God contrasted with the kingdoms of the world—whether they be the kingdoms of the Babylonians or the Romans the Greeks or even the kingdoms of the children of Israel from time to time—the kingdom of God stands in stark contrast, and it calls the nations and people of this earth to recognize that God is the creator, God is the provider, God is the sustainer and owner; God is the ever-loving and forgiving and patient king who calls us to turn and see that God’s ways—and only God’s ways—are just; and only God’s will is righteous; and only God’s claims and promises are sure—and ultimately profitable—not by the terms of this worldly kingdom, but in terms of our peace and hope and joy in the Spirit.

This is the kingdom Jesus sent his followers to proclaim. And there are at least two ways to understand this kingdom of God: first as a distant—hoped for and simultaneously feared—reality to be made manifest in the last days; and secondly as something here now... not

physically, perhaps not fully, but as a spiritual reality for all who would grasp it and place their full faith in God today. This is the spiritual reality Christ calls us to.

We're called to recognize that while this kingdom we physically live in today is not God's kingdom, we can—through faith—open our hearts to the reality of God's kingdom and renounce our loyalty to the deceitful ways of this worldly kingdom and align ourselves with the values, gifts, and responsibilities of being true subjects of our loving and all-powerful God.

And let's be clear: this does not mean we must renounce our nation, or give up the values of living as law abiding citizens. When the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus on this they asked if they should pay taxes and Jesus called for a coin and said "whose picture is on this?" and they said, "Caesar's." And Jesus said, "then render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

That's the idea for us too. We are to recognize to whom our ultimate loyalty is owed. We're to recognize that it's God who formed this world and created us and all things; God who acted with power to reveal God's love and desires; God who sent Moses to free the slaves; God who parted the seas and gave manna from heaven; God who chastised them when they strayed and rejoiced with them when they returned; God who gave them the law for their own benefit and offered forgiveness upon forgiveness when they failed; God who came among us when our minds were too weak and muddled to recall what the true God looked, and sounded, and acted like; God who through Jesus healed and cast out demons and calmed the storms and fed the thousands; God who suffered when this worldly kingdom rejected him; God who died on that cross with forgiveness on his lips... And it was God who rose again to say: "and still I am king, and still I am loving and merciful, and still I long for you to enter into my kingdom and know the joy and hope and peace I offer you today."

Living in God's kingdom today means learning—bit by bit—to see the grace of God for what it is and realize that while we can never deserve such a thing God wants us to know and experience God's presence now and always. Living in God's kingdom means learning—bit by bit—to recognize the ways of this worldly kingdom that stand against the values of God's kingdom. Living in God's kingdom means that when the values of this worldly kingdom stand against God's values and dreams for all of creation we will stand with God; we will—to the best of our abilities—live according to God's desires rather than the values of this world.

And it's not an easy thing. For far too long our evangelists have tried to tempt us into the Jesus-party by offering us only the "goodies" that we lust after—"come follow Jesus and be cured; come follow Jesus and have friends and get rich and go to heaven after you die—and the problem is that these are the very things that appeal to our worldly desires. And we greedily seek them as though we can live in both kingdoms at the same time.

But in order to know the peace and joy and hope of the Kingdom of God we have to renounce our faith in that other set of values. We can't serve both God and our lust after wealth, and power and fame, or our lust after anything else in this world. In order to know the peace of God's kingdom today we have to hand our trust solely over to our God. We have to believe that God knows what it takes to bring peace, we have to believe that God's logic—which often runs plain contrary to the logic of this world—is true and right and good. So in faith we place, not just our afterlife, but our here and now in God's hands as we choose to live by the values and priorities of God's realm rather than this earthly one.

And when we do—when we allow God to transform our hearts and minds through faith—we find that God is as good as God's promises. And the truth of the goodness of God's kingdom spreads over us... and through us to others. I pray today that God's Spirit would inspire us to seek not to just gather the gifts of God's grace, but to live and love as loyal subjects of our Lord. To whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen