

The Mystery of the Kingdom

The Epistle (Colossians i. 12 ff)

Brethren: We give thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

The Gospel (St. John viii . 33ff)

Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews? Jesus answered him, Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me: what hast thou done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.

Today's Epistle and Gospel reveal only a few aspects of the enigma that is the Kingdom of God. Think of it: believers "transferred" by faith alone into a new realm whose Ruler possesses all the fulness of God, who is Himself Creator of all, and to whom all things are subject. But there He stands, under arrest: *Behold, the Man!*, wrists bound together before the Roman governor, under cross examination as to how this wretched yet strangely majestic Figure could possibly be a king.

From the very beginning of the Gospel story, the kingdom was an absolutely central theme, but as we shall see, Christ's contemporaries, both friend and foe, possessed no context for the manner in which He would choose to present it. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!* proclaimed John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2, NRSV). And shortly afterward Jesus Himself appeared, saying *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news* (Mark 1:15). Immediately Jesus embarked upon a campaign of verifying His claim, both through His teaching and through miraculous signs.

In this initial stage of His ministry, the people were willing to at least tentatively embrace the possibility that this was the Coming One, the messianic Son of David who would represent the fulfillment of long held expectations. Israel had been promised unequivocally even in Abraham centuries before a mission of leadership among all the earth's nations. Each successive

covenant which God initiated with the people repeated these promises, but hope for their realization was clouded by long seasons of disobedience, rebellion against God, and consequent divine judgments. The greatest of these was the Babylonian exile, which forever changed the shape and practice of the Jewish life and religion. The bulk of the nation now lived permanently apart from the cherished Land. And although the destroyed Temple was rebuilt, Israel now lived almost exclusively under foreign domination, culminating in the might and power of Rome. It was into this very scene one day that the lone, unprepossessing figure of Jesus Christ walked.

Overawed by His miracles, and stupefied by the power and authority of His teaching, the people give lip-service at first to this wonder-worker from Nazareth. But it is even at this point that the apparent welcome and gracious reception begins to evaporate. The elements of hostility, resistance, and opposition begin to inexorably build. It becomes apparent to all that Jesus finds very few points of consonance with the established religious and civic rulers. This in itself spells problems for anyone wishing to associate with Him, as the social institutions upon which they are dependent are in the total control of these authorities. This king-elect refuses to unite His constituency smoothly and masterfully, providing appropriate positions for established leaders, and adapting everyone's pet agenda to His own. Rather, He drives off the nominally committed, sends the sensation-seekers packing, infuriates those with the power to destroy Him, and even sorely tests to the very core of their beings those who are closest to Him.

Furthermore, He begins to redefine the entire concept of the kingdom. It is a realm in which the poor of spirit, the persecuted, the humble of heart, the mournful, the meek are those truly *blessed*. It is no place for the proud, the self-righteous, and the greedy. It must be carefully and discreetly referred to through the code-words of mysterious parables: It is like a field of *wheat* and weeds; like a *grain of mustard seed*; like *leaven* hidden in flour; like a *treasure in a field* (Matt. 13). To those who would some day review these words in retrospect, It would be clear that Christ was referring throughout to something entirely outside the conventions of His day, to be fully realized under a whole new set of conditions.

And finally, He undergoes the humiliation of rejection, suffering, and death, at the hands of His countrymen, through the means of their Roman overlords.

[Pilate] said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." (John 19:14b, 15)

Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews

said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'"
Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." (John 19:19-22)

But what of today? We have been *translated into the kingdom of God's dear son*. We are members of that very kingdom for which the covenant nation waited those two millennia ago, members by adoption, by gracious inclusion, just because of the kindness and love of God. Yet it is still in so many respects a mystery. The King Himself is invisible, and manifests His power in ways that can be very clearly seen, but only through eyes of faith. It is a kingdom with laws and rules and regulations and restrictions to which only its members are subject. All of them are bound by the principle of love, whether to God or to man. It is their chief defining characteristic. It is a kingdom which exists in two dimensions. It functions in this world, where its subjects are obligated to live either until death or the visible return of their Ruler. But it is equally present in *heavenly places*, where these very same citizens are *seated with Christ Jesus* (Eph. 2:6).

Seeing all of this, seeing the history of our Lord Jesus Christ and His presentation of the Kingdom, we should, we *must*, be far better prepared to endure all of the changes that occur in this earthly realm. Rulers come, and rulers go. Some rise, some fall. All is subject to change, and there is no predictability or warning concerning any of it. Personalities win the day, or powerful interest groups, all of it functioning on levels way, way up there, out of our sight, and I might say, *gladly* so! To give any of it too much attention is to invite discouragement and to make oneself subject to its vicissitudes.

All the while, Jesus has been trying so hard, as He did with His own disciples, to make us view all of life with spiritual eyes. That's the winning game. He has bigger and far grander plans. Meanwhile, we must live out the Kingdom here on earth, diligently and conscientiously doing so in every single way we know how.

No one can do any better than that.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.