

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Kingdom of God was central to Jesus' preaching. When we participate in the Mass, we say together what we have come to call the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father. This prayer is called the Lord's Prayer, because it is based on a prayer that Jesus taught his disciples in the Matthew and Luke Gospels.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom, but what did Jesus' disciples understand by the word *kingdom*? We already know that the idea of a kingdom was a central component in the Israelites' understanding of covenant love. The kingdom, the king, and the Temple were understood to be the external signs of God's covenant promises to love and protect His Chosen People. When Jesus' contemporaries thought of a kingdom, they thought of a geopolitical reality, of a nation located in the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Their idea of a messiah, an anointed one whom God would send to defeat their political enemies, was closely connected to their idea of kingdom.

It is evident that some of Jesus' listeners understood the word *kingdom* in the geopolitical sense. The mother of the sons of Zebedee, for example, certainly understood Jesus to be speaking of a geopolitical reality; otherwise she would never have said, "*Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand the other at your left, in your kingdom*" (Matthew 20:21). Many in the crowd who welcomed Jesus into the city of Jerusalem (on what we know/refer to as Palm Sunday), before his Passion, were also thinking of a geopolitical reality; otherwise they never would have said, "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" (Mark 11:9-10).

You may have noticed that where Mark says, "*the kingdom of God,*" Matthew, in parallel passages, says, "*the kingdom of heaven*" (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17). Matthew did not intend to introduce a new concept with this ever so slight change of wording; he wanted to be responsive to the sensitivities of his audience. Matthew's then audience was primarily made up of Jews; who strictly refrained from naming God out of a deep awe and reverence of God's greatness and Holy Name. Matthew, therefore, portrays Jesus saying, "*kingdom of heaven,*" rather than "*kingdom of God.*" Sometimes, however, the effect of this change over the centuries has sadly caused further misunderstanding about Jesus' intent when he spoke of the kingdom of God.

For many, "**heaven**" was understood to be a place where good persons went after they left their life on earth. For such persons, then, the words "*kingdom of heaven*" or "*kingdom of God*" would refer to a spiritual reality, but one that cannot be entered until after death. This too, seemed to be quite a different idea from the one that Jesus proclaimed. Jesus taught his disciples to pray that the kingdom will be present "on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10) [the Lord's Prayer]. What, then, did Jesus mean by the word "*kingdom*"? Because the kingdom was such a mysterious reality, Jesus taught about the kingdom through parables. Many of Jesus' parables began, "*the kingdom of God is like ...*" A parable, at its root, was meant as a comparison. Like any good teacher, Jesus explained what was beyond human comprehension by comparing it to something with which we are familiar. The comparison in a true parable, however, is between someone or something in the story and the audience listening to the story. The function of a parable is not only to teach the audience, but also to call the audience to conversion and action.

(SR: *Scripture: Nourished by the Word*, by Margaret Nutting Ralph, @2002, Loyola Press)