

# GREVILLEA

May, 2008

Welcome to the eleventh edition of **Grevillea** an e-magazine to stimulate your thinking!

Why "Grevillea"? The Macquarie Dictionary defines "grevillea" as any shrub or tree of the very large, mainly Australian genus Grevillea family. Many are attractive ornamentals and a number are useful trees. It is also worth noting that grevillea can be very toxic.

So Grevillea is an Australian e-magazine which will cover a large range of subjects as time goes on. We trust they will be interesting (not just ornamental), useful and stimulate (not irritate) your thinking. We aim to have articles that will be short, practical and worth your opening them as attachments.

This edition focuses on **The Kingdom of God.**

I have written an introductory article emphasizing that the reign of God has both personal and social dimensions. Dean Drayton looks at evangelism in the light of the kingdom of God. From her connections with other children, youth and family workers, Christine Bayliss Kelly considers the reign of God from that perspective. Thomas Smith offers some personal reflections as one who "discovered" the kingdom of God in recent years. Finally Paul Drury, drawing on his prison ministry experience, gives some interesting insights into what the kingdom of God means in that context.

Email me if you have some thoughts to share. My email address is [chrisw@pnp.unitingchurch.org.au](mailto:chrisw@pnp.unitingchurch.org.au)

I hope you are stimulated by this edition of Grevillea.

Grace and peace  
Chris Walker

# Jesus and the Reign of God

Chris Walker

The central message of Jesus was the kingdom or reign of God. Early in Mark's gospel we have the summary statement: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15). The whole of Mark's gospel can be seen as an expansion of this verse. The signal for the commencement of Jesus' public ministry for Mark was the arrest of John the Baptist. Jesus recognized that his time, God's right time, had come. He commenced his public ministry of announcing the kingdom of God. He inaugurated the reign of God by words and symbolic actions, and invited people to respond by accepting this good news. They could enter the kingdom of God now, and seek its realization in the present, though its final fulfilment was eschatological.

The reign of God was Jesus' overarching vision or theme. What he said about God, love, humanity or ethics all related to his vision of the in-breaking rule of God. God's reign of love, justice and peace was becoming a reality in people's lives and in the life of society when they responded positively to Jesus' proclamation. The reign of God came near through Jesus. Those who were near Jesus were where the action was, close to the kingdom, where God was at work. The conflict between God's reign and the ways of the world also became increasingly evident in Jesus' ministry.

Jesus not only proclaimed the reign of God; he demonstrated it by healing people, by casting out evil spirits, by miracles, and symbolic actions. As people looked to what was happening through and around Jesus, they saw something of the nature of God's reign. He taught about the kingdom of God using parables and sayings and he showed that God was indeed at work through him by bringing healing and wholeness to people's lives.

Sometimes he denounced people, especially religious leaders, who opposed God's reign by their words, attitudes and behaviour. For Jesus there could be no compromise between God's ways and the ways of the world that were against God, between God and Satan and Mammon. While Jesus was inclusive in how he related to people, people could exclude themselves from the kingdom of God by refusing to accept Jesus and his message. Those opposed to him became determined to do away with him for they saw him as a threat to their power and influence. They refused to see him as an agent of God, instead holding him to be a dangerous disturber of the religious and social order.

If modern, or post modern, followers of Jesus and the churches are to be true to Jesus, they too need to be a disturbing as well as comforting influence in society. Seeking to bring healing and wholeness can involve challenging people and society as well as providing religious and welfare services. They need to bring a godly perspective that seeks to represent the reign of God and not simply prevailing values and attitudes.

## **The Personal Dimension**

Jesus announced and demonstrated the reign of God to individuals. In the summary statement given by Mark, Jesus called people to repent and believe in the good news.

In people's personal lives Jesus recognized that people knew they were not living according to God's will. Interestingly, Jesus did not feel the need to tell people they were sinners. He did not have to draw attention to people's failings and then offer the reign of God as the solution. His fellow Jews mostly knew that they were failing to live up to the commandments of God. To the rich young man who thought he had kept the commandments, Jesus told him to give up his possessions in order to really put God first in his life (Mark 10:17-23). Jesus was conscious that riches made it hard for people to enter the reign of God. Others, who recognized their sinfulness, readily received Jesus' message and acceptance. They gladly turned from their past and accepted the new life Jesus offered. The Samaritan woman was open to the truth Jesus offered, despite changing the topics of the conversation, and her life was changed as a result (John 4:5-42). Jesus was willing to receive the attentions of a woman who was a known sinner when they were clearly evidence of love and gratitude (Luke 7:36-50).

Jesus promised that people would find comfort and strength in him. He would provide rest and guidance if people turned to him and accepted him (Matthew 11:28-30). For those who wanted to become followers of Jesus, however, he pointed out it would not be an easy path. Accepting Jesus' call to discipleship, becoming committed to the reign of God, demanded complete loyalty. No half hearted following was acceptable. People could not look back if they were to be Jesus' followers (Luke 9:62). He urged them to count the cost and be willing to place him and the cause of the reign of God before everything else (Luke 14: 25-33). Most graphically he told people to take up their cross in order to be his disciple. The reign of God was something worth giving up one's life for.

The call of Jesus to individuals continues to invite them to be his followers, not just for their own well being, but for the sake of the reign of God. The invitation of Jesus was and is a call to become involved in something greater than oneself or even one's family. In the Western world it means that being a disciple is not just a private matter that helps us to cope with the stresses of life, provides us with a positive self image, and will assist us to be successful in our lives. Some of this may well result, but it is incidental to the claim Jesus makes on the lives of those who would be his disciples. Entering the reign of God means responding to what God has done in Jesus Christ. It involves changing direction, trusting God completely, and seeking God's righteousness. In doing so, personal needs are met.

### **The Social Dimension**

The kingdom of God is a collective term. It implies more than personal fulfillment. The reign of God in society would mean God's will prevailing in the social, economic and political areas of life. Clearly Jesus wanted not just individuals to respond to his message but that the nation would do so. The first century was a critical time for the nation of Israel. There was a great deal of unrest and dissatisfaction. The Romans were in control and there were many who were prepared to take up arms to overthrow them. Many hoped for a Davidic type leader who would enable them to do so. It would seem that there were those who thought Jesus might be such a figure. In John's gospel after the feeding of the five thousand we have this statement, "When Jesus realized that they were about to take him by force to make him king, he withdrew to the mountain by himself" (John 6:15). He refused to become a military Messiah. His way was the way of persuasion, compassion and non-violent action.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, he wept over the city saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:42). He wanted to see the nation change its ways not just individuals. Like the prophets before him he knew that failing to do so would lead to dire consequences for Israel. Within a few decades the Romans did take decisive and harsh action against the rebellious nation.

The kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed was not just for the sake of one nation, and one ethnic group. The reign of God is universal in scope. Even though Jesus' earthly ministry was concentrated in his homeland, he pointed out that his own people could miss out on being in God's realm while others entered. He said, "Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). The book of Revelation says explicitly, "After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).

In our twenty first century context, commitment to the reign of God means commitment to a just, peaceful and multicultural realm. It is universal in scope in a world where people are so often divided along ethnic, religious and national lines. It recognizes the worth of all people in God's eyes whatever their race, gender or social status. The call of Jesus is to work and pray for God's reign and to seek to carry out God's will on earth as in heaven (Matthew 6:10). That means giving particular attention to the most disadvantaged and those with the least power. This is not a condescending approach. It is in fact in the interests of all, for a society that cares for all its people, especially those with the least resources, will mean a more harmonious and safe society. Peace can never be satisfactory when based on force; it needs to be based on justice and compassion, if people are to freely live in harmony with one another. The way of achieving change if we follow the way of Jesus is to use persuasion and peaceful symbolic action. Jesus would have us take up the cross of non-violence and love of enemies; never the way of violence and hatred. For him the ends of justice and peace are to be sought by using just, compassionate and peaceful means. The way of costly love is the way of Jesus.

The kingdom of God, then, was the central message and controlling concept for Jesus. He embodied it in all he said and did, and finally died for it and was raised again by God. In Christian preaching to preach Christ is to preach the kingdom of God. Yet it is important to appreciate the importance of the concept "the reign of God" for it does hold together both the individual and communal dimensions of the good news Jesus proclaimed.

## **Evangelism and the Kingdom of God**

Dean Drayton

The re-discovery of the centrality of the 'kingdom of God' in the New Testament has important implications for evangelism. The 'kingdom of God' is often translated 'kingdom of God' or the 'presence of God' to acknowledge the difficulties that this

presents for those whom the word kingdom has power and gender issues, though it is also important to explore what Jesus means by this reality. In this paper the term kingdom of God is retained. Jesus preached 'good news' or the evangel that he directly related to the kingdom of God

### **The Kingdom of God has Come Near.**

In Mark's gospel Jesus announces his message as Good News from God. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near (or is at hand); repent and believe the good news," that is the evangel.

The evangel is that the Kingdom of God is at hand. The message calls us to repent from not believing that the reality of God is at hand. In the Church it is generally understood that evangelism is derived from the reformation emphasis on faith derived from Paul's letters in which the proclamation of the gospel seeks the response of faith from the hearers. In fact the word 'evangelism' emerged soon after the beginning of the denominational era. Wesley and Whitfield did not engage in evangelism as it is now understood. They lived in an England in which all considered themselves Christian. The unique element of their message was the call for adults to experience for themselves that they could experience God's converting power and called for interested people to join with their movement. They did not believe it was possible to predict when a person would discover God's grace.

By the 1830's the word evangelism was used to describe the method that evangelists used to bring people to repent of their sin, and commit themselves to Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour of their lives. It was Charles Grandison Finney's formulation of faith in the 1820's that placed the emphasis on the moment when the individual responded to the message as the moment of salvation. The preacher called for sinners to commit their lives to Jesus and put Jesus Christ on the throne of their heart. Since those hearing could make that decision then it was possible to call for those who did to identify themselves. During the denominational era attention has thus been focused on the need for individuals to be converted and thus saved. How then does this relate to Jesus declaration that the Kingdom of God has come near? It is a key question to ask how evangelism relates to the 'kingdom of God?'

### **Is the Kingdom of God within?**

It is amazing to ask people the following question. Where is the kingdom of God? 'The kingdom of God is within you' is the almost automatic reply. This interpretation of the kingdom of God is derived from a focus on one verse, the translation of Luke 17:21 By asking Jesus into our lives the kingdom of God comes within us. Such a view of the kingdom reflects the pressure of the democratic age. The Christian gospel calls for an individual commitment as the decisive feature of Christian life. It should not be surprising that this internal subjective view of the experience of the kingdom of God sits well with the modern age. It is so widespread in the life of the church and the wider community. Much literature about religion presumes that the essence of the Christian message is that the kingdom of God is within.

### **A Closer Look at Luke 17:21.**

If we look at this passage in Luke in context, a very different meaning emerges. And this different meaning is *consistent with every other occasion* when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God as at hand, rather than within.

Once when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For in fact the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20, 21).

The Pharisees were the questioners and the critics. Jesus states that the kingdom of God was not for them to see or point out, but in fact the kingdom they did not see was already among them as they gathered as a group. It is possible to see how in an age of individualism this passage is completely misinterpreted. The kingdom of God is among you, is reduced to mean the kingdom of God is within me. It is as if I have put Jesus on the throne of my life, and Jesus is within me.

### **The Evangel seeks a Response.**

In Jesus announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand he is quite explicit. This evangel requires a response from us. Rather than believing what we want to believe, we need to repent and believe that the kingdom of God is at hand. Hearing the evangel then is to discover the kingdom of God is within reach, available, or at hand.

The evangelist’s role is to present what Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God. There is a lot to preach about. The kingdom is like a mustard seed that grows into a large tree, like seed sown by a sower, like a treasure found in a field, like finding the pearl of great price. The Greek word evangel means good news. To discover the kingdom of God is to discover the richness and freshness of life surprised, growing, enlarged, empowered and fulfilled by entering into God’s realm. At the core of Jesus message is the possibility that a person can enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus reveals how to enter the kingdom in a remarkable way.

‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ They (the disciples) were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible; but not for God; for God all things are possible’ (Mark 10:24b-27).

Here is the logic of the kingdom writ large. It is impossible for mortals to enter the kingdom of God, this kingdom that is at hand, that has come near to us. WE CANNOT GO IN. The door is shut to those who want to go in. Yet an intriguing possibility is opened in that what is not possible for us is possible for God. And suddenly the answer is devastatingly clear. No one can enter the kingdom of God, but GOD CAN BRING US INTO THE KINGDOM.

### **The Evangelist**

The role of the evangelist is to declare that God wants to bring us into God’s presence. The message of the kingdom includes this critical offer and invitation. God can bring you into the kingdom and God can hold you in the kingdom. Does God want you in God’s kingdom? Which God are we talking about? Not the God of power, prestige and control. As we keep listening to Jesus we are brought to the cross where our very understanding of the nature of God is turned upside down. God is at work here in the midst of this hate, betrayal and suffering for the sake of the world.

The evangelist will underline the resurrection message 'God raised Jesus from the dead,' and in one fell swoop, both the messenger and the message are seen in a new light. The kingdom of God is at hand, with God within reach and able in Christ's death and resurrection to bring each person into the kingdom, but the kingdom of God was also at hand because Jesus was at hand in whatever situation he had found himself. God has made Jesus the narrow gate into the kingdom, offering to all who come to the cross and see and receive the forgiveness and grace of God.

The evangelist will show how the evangel of the Kingdom of God does not draw us out of the world into the church, but calls us to be part of Christ's body that identifies the world as the place that God loves. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus does not send the disciples 'out' into the world, he sends them forth into the world. In the Great Commission a paraphrase notes the 'go' is a participle and translates it as 'going, therefore disciple you all the nations'. There is no sense of go out into an alien world but all the time be involved with going and discipling a world in which Christ is Lord. Or again in John. The resurrected Jesus in the Upper Room says:

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

As Jesus was incarnate in the world, so the Church is to be incarnate in the world. The evangelist will declare that in the mission of God the community's task is to witness and serve the society of which it is a part.

Given the power of imagery from film and TV, the power of the word in advertising and education and the call to a personal career celebrating ambition and success, it is unlikely that the privatized personal view of the kingdom of God will be easily replaced with the truth of the New Testament presentation of the Kingdom of God. That will only come as the evangelist and the Church takes seriously the witness to this message and its implications for discipleship.

### **The Congregation**

The evangelist and the congregational leader will know that the life of the people of God is to be sustained by scripture and the sacraments as it is intentional about its regular proclamation of the mission of God casting the compassion of God about in its witness and service in the wider society. It will be aware of the need for the minds of believers to be transformed so that they can discern and live out the will of the God of the kingdom. It will be somewhat like the church of the first three centuries which when persecuted had to be clear about its purpose as expressed in appropriate belief, behaviour and belonging in the life of the congregation. The congregation will be careful to grow its life through small relational groups which anchor people in the midst of the congregation and provide ways of people's passions and gifts being exercised in witness and service. Not everyone is an evangelist, but the congregation will know that it is its task to ensure that each of its members can give an account of the hope of the kingdom that Jesus is bringing. The congregation too will be future orientated, living out the Lord's prayer as the Lord's call to mission. The congregation's role is critical. God recruits people one by one for the task of bearing witness to the kingdom. Each member is given the privilege of being an ambassador for Christ, declaring the reconciliation that is at the heart of the kingdom of God.

(This article is taken from the book 'Which Mission' due to be published next year.)

## The Kingdom of God- conversations with various lay people across the Presbytery

Christine Bayliss Kelly

When I think of the word 'Kingdom' it reminds me of the knights of the roundtable, and of battles and folklore. Yet in the Old Testament it invoked images of small fiefdoms- where kings really were leaders of the people- not much of the royal crown stuff. I mean, most of the time King David didn't strike me as very pretentious, but I think of the possibility of King Charles and it is really weird. 'Kingdom' is a concept which is really difficult to relate to the world in which I live, or the kind of future we, as Christians, might look towards. Yet the phrase 'Kingdom of God' somehow lifts it out of the pages of history into a much greater meta-narrative, where God is present in time and place, in the whole of history and of humanity.

*I think that when we talk about the kingdom of God we are somehow linking the present experience of life with what we hope life will be like in some nebulous time in the future. In many ways, they are so contrasted that we forget God is at work now and God's kingdom is both 'now' and 'yet to come'.*

*Yet that is really difficult to come to terms with as the experience of 'now' doesn't seem to have much of the good experience of God for many people!*

*Well, that is true but how many good stories do you actually get to hear? You just have to listen to the news to discover the worst of humanity- yet, if you actually listen to people their lives are littered with stories of God at work in small and large ways.*

So what do we mean by kingdom of God? Is it that wonderful vision in Isaiah of the new heaven and the new earth where everyone is at peace with each other and there is no more crying or mourning or whatever awful stuff we have to live through here and now? Or is it an understanding of God being at work in people's lives bringing 'life' rather than 'death'? Is it about the physical world as we experience it now and would like to have it in the future, or is it about the spiritual world both now and then?

*Maybe it is less to do with our material needs, like I have always thought, and more about our spiritual needs. I mean I've always wondered how people who live in poverty and who struggle to have food and clean water can find anything to rejoice in, in this world, but I have heard stories of some of them who do. What is the kingdom of God for them? Or what does it mean for those who may feel trapped in bodies because of sickness or who are paralysed or disfigured or whatever? How would they understand the kingdom of God?*

*They're good questions. I was listening to someone recently who was born with Cerebral Palsy. A friend of theirs was also disabled and they were looking forward to the new kingdom of God because they believed their body would then be 'whole'. But this guy with Cerebral Palsy was adamant that it didn't matter what his body was like- after all he was made in the image of God no matter what. He believed he was a whole person 'now' so the kingdom of God for him was more about everyone being in a good relationship with God and being aware of God in their lives. He would be very happy to have the same body in the kingdom yet to come.*

*I suppose the Kingdom of God for me is the understanding I have of God being in control of my life, now and into the future. It is somehow recognising that I do not have the capability of understanding the whole of life, or for that matter, even this small part of it, but my belief is that God does understand and is greater than me or anyone else for that matter. I mean, I'm not really into the monarchy through genetic heritage- that's ridiculous. But I do think we, as human beings, have tried to do it on our own too much, and we have mucked it up. I am reassured that God is in control, but I also recognise I need to submit myself to Him in all of my life- which is no easy thing!*

For me the kingdom of God is something I feel called to join in. It is an invitation to try and make this world a better place in the things I say and do. I believe that God is more than capable of bringing the kingdom about without any human intervention at all- even the stones could be raised up for the purposes of God. But I do believe God wants us to use our gifts and skills in the opportunities God gives us to join in God's kingdom. Whether our engaging with the task makes a difference or not is not important. But I do think it is a matter of being faithful in engaging with our lives, being disciples trying to follow Jesus and learn from him, and being in a right relationship (whatever that means) with God. If or when that future kingdom comes is irrelevant. We can't spend our lives yearning for something that may not happen in our life time, but we can live our lives to the fullest now.

It's funny but I had a vision a long time ago. I was in this place filled with bright light and warm love and I knew there were many people around me. I even recognised someone I knew well, but his body was really just like brilliant white light, although I remember his smile and the silly hat he always wore! Anyway, all of a sudden I looked up and I was aware that Jesus was coming and there with me and everyone and time didn't matter and nothing else mattered except I was with God in that moment. Yet I wanted to stay there forever, and even now, about 20 years later, I can still feel that warm loving feeling of light and being with God. If that is what the kingdom of God is like- timeless and with God- then bring it on!

How amazing! I suppose that is really hard to experience now- although many people talk about their mountaintop experiences. And that is certainly a spiritual experience worth looking forward to. But where is the practical side of the kingdom of God? Where is 'God' acted out in the little things- those acts of kindness, or gifts of food or clothes, those words of comfort, or the breaking through the barriers?

*Does it have to be one or the other or is the Kingdom of God this intricate mix of spirit and body? In some ways it seems to make sense that God's Kingdom can be both now and yet to come, both spiritual and practical. Maybe that is part of the mystery and is just us as humans wanting to have everything down in black and white. Maybe it is the experience of the awful that we discover a greater appreciation of the good. Maybe the Kingdom of God is as much and more than we can ever hope to understand or explain. A bit like most things to do with this incredible and amazing God of love we worship and seek to follow. Maybe.....*

## **THE KINGDOM OF GOD – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Thomas Smith

The Kingdom of God is like a wonderful treasure that I have discovered. I have sold all my “treasures” for this greatest of treasures. I have found Jesus’ kingdom to be the perfect gift from God to humans.

Perhaps I sound a little over the top? But I did not come to God’s kingdom easily. It took three years of courage and painful thinking for me to be open to the potential of Jesus’ teaching of the Kingdom. So it is no exaggeration to say that the notions within the Kingdom of God provide me with the most satisfying and coherent understanding of myself and the events in this world.

Yet even before I was aware of the Kingdom of God I had been unknowingly learning to live by some of its principles. Some thirty years ago I was asked to go to a Public school to help a Scripture Teacher who had the “world’s most difficult Scripture class”. Within this noisy, boisterous and ill-disciplined Year 6 class I found a girl who was “tough” and who exhibited formidable body-language. She was the epicentre of the chaos in the classroom. She showed no signs of “personhood” as she told me that “she had walked out of the school three times already”. On this day I chose the way of grace- that is, of an unconditional and non-judging interest in her. She must have felt a gentle stirring of the Spirit because she began to talk about her unhappiness with the large number of men who came to her single mother’s home. The Kingdom of God was at the interface of our interaction and I didn’t know enough to recognise it. The result for the girl was that she became friends with her Scripture teacher and joined her Sunday school class. I didn’t know then that I was witnessing the Kingdom of God breaking into a Public School Classroom.

I was to witness many such occurrences of God’s Kingdom bursting into situations and people’s lives, but I had been taught to interpret these events as psychological things (blessed by God) or “sanctified common sense” (wise actions), but not taught to see them as the Kingdom intervening in everyday situations.

However, I had continued to feel pressure, in my mid-forties, to discover the importance of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom. My conscience became increasingly insistent about me breaking out of an "evangelism only" paradigm to a more general model that takes cognisance of God's interest in opposing injustice and oppression.

I had some ideas about where to start my investigation of the Kingdom of God. Like most Christians, I knew from my youthful Bible reading that Jesus' ministry focussed on God's Kingdom. I was not unique in having a long term fascination with the Sermon on the Mount. But it had been a puzzle to me as to whether we are meant to live by the Sermon on the Mount (literally turning the other cheek), or whether it is an idealistic metaphor that guides us as we do our best to live by Jesus' teaching. Once I began to consider the passages from the perspective of the Kingdom of God (which I still didn't know much about), I came to the conclusion that the Sermon on the Mount is a summary of the principles of the Kingdom of God- that we are to live by. Once I worked this out I had some "hard data" on what the Kingdom of God is.

Let me share with you what I found out, so far, about the Kingdom of God.

**The Kingdom of God does not focus exclusively on personal sins:** Jesus began his public ministry (from Luke's account in chapter 4) with the announcement that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. My earlier Christian context had said that Jesus was referring to spiritual poverty, captives to sin and the spiritually blind. However, I found Moltmann<sup>i</sup> helpful in exploring what I intuitively knew was a narrow understanding of Jesus' interests in our world. For Moltmann the problem of evil in the world is more than a personal sin problem. It is also a social and political problem. Capitalism, inhuman technology and discrimination in their many forms continue to adapt and oppress people. Much of the world's misery is no longer to be found mainly in the attitudes of humans but in the effects of human structures and institutions. However, structures are not totally responsible for oppression.<sup>ii</sup> Habermas puts the issue cogently with: "If the title 'Christ' refers to the redeemer and liberator, then practical 'Christian' action can only be directed towards the liberation of man from his inhumanity. The true front on which the liberation of Christ takes place does not run between soul and body or between persons and structures, but between the powers of the world as it decays and collapses into ruin, and the powers of the spirit and of the future."<sup>iii</sup>

**God has chosen to open Godself to pain and other feelings:** The great God we serve is close to us<sup>iv</sup> and is not unfeeling about the situation of the oppressed and the poor. I had formed an intuition about God being a feeling being when I was a young person. I had not accepted the 'correction' by a church authority, regarding my understanding of God as a being who feels sadness. Moltmann's recounting of the experience of E. Wiesel with God at Auschwitz<sup>v</sup> resonated with my apprehension of God in the depths of my heart.

"The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the

noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice in myself answer: "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows . . . ." <sup>vi</sup> Moltmann goes on to say, "Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference." <sup>vii</sup>

**The Kingdom of God does not call for Christians to reduce their working out of the Creation mandate:** When I look at the work of individual Christians from a Kingdom of God perspective I see that all human work and activity can be of value to God. I had never been able to understand how God could lose interest in the creation when sin entered it. Surely, I thought, God's original purposes for humanity in the Creation still stand! I like the way Schmeman, an Orthodox Christian, explains the value God has given to creation.

For the Orthodox, the "creation" is a sacrament of God's presence. The world, as God's creation speaks of its Creator in its deepest, essential nature. "The world, be it in its totality as cosmos, or in its life and becoming as time and history, is an epiphany of God, a means of His revelation, presence, and power." <sup>viii</sup> Therefore, Redemption, through Jesus Christ, has everything to do with people recovering their perspective of the creation as an epiphany of God. Schmeman expresses this idea cogently when he said, "God was not merely about a rescue operation to recover lost people; it is more an action to complete what God had undertaken from the beginning." <sup>ix</sup> Christian doctors, teachers, domestic dutians, farmers, artists, cleaners and other vocations are pleasing to God when they fulfil their responsibilities as unto God.

**Christian disciples are to be active in being Kingdom of God agents in the world:** Groome, one of the worlds leading Christian Educators, rejects the notion that Christian discipleship is to prepare people for life-long commitment to God as expressed through the church only. He believes members of the Kingdom of God are to live by a faith that accepts responsibility for people's social and political worlds instead of being focused exclusively on "sacred concerns". Christian faith requires its claimants to join the public discourse and the political struggle for a better world. We must refuse to be part of domesticating our people. <sup>x</sup>

To prepare people to be active for God in the world Groome seeks to equip people to transform their identity, and therefore their actions (agency) for the purposes of the reign of God. People form their identity by choosing to act according to value/beliefs of those they admire in their society. Jesus teaching, by deed and words, is an accessible source of identifiers for Christians.

To help us "be transformed by the renewal of our minds" <sup>xi</sup>, Groome promotes the use of "reflective processes" that he labeled praxis. This involves us in reflecting on our actions to make conscious what our motivational values were that we acted upon, and whether we wish to affirm those values. For example, when I reflected on a difficult Science class, taken during the last period of the day, I remembered feeling powerless and frustrated. I then remembered threatening a pupil if he didn't stop being silly, when it may have been more beneficial for both of us had I asked him to "get on" with his work.

We are to compare our thoughts and actions to Jesus' actions and words so that we may see which values need transforming to God's values. There is, according to Groome, a second side to praxis. When we read the Scriptures and other forms of the Christian Story we are to bring our identity and being into that Christian story. We are to ask questions like, "What would I feel if I did as Jesus commanded his disciples?" Praxis is meant to be shared, not to be a solitary bit of introspection. People can habitually use the Christian Story to critique their lives and their socio-cultural world. Through praxis the Spirit of God often opens up new possibilities for action such as being truly merciful and of being an agent of Shalom and justice.<sup>xii</sup>

**God opposes those who pass judgement on others:** It is no surprise to see that our world is perceived very differently when considered from the Kingdom vantage point. Especially helpful to me has been Bonhoeffer's insightful comments on the universal human propensity to judge other humans. He sees this basic human failing as an outcome of people's fundamental disunity from God, as expressed in 'the Fall'. However, Jesus- the inaugurator of the Kingdom - said that we are not to judge, so that we will not be judged (Matthew 7: 1). Jesus, the one who models the Kingdom, came not to condemn but to save (John 3.17). People who judge others, show their disunion from God, and this leads them to pass judgement by their own criterion. Jesus demands that people give up the knowledge of good and evil, and stop judging others.<sup>xiii</sup>

The judgements Christians can make, according to Bonhoeffer, are to have a judgement that will consist in brotherly help, in lifting up the falling and in showing the way to the straying, in exhortation and in consolation (Gal. 6; Matt. 18.15ff.), and also, if the need arises, in a temporary suspension of fellowship, but in such a manner that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (I Cor. 5.5). It will be a judgement of reconciliation and not of disunion, a judgement by not judging, a judgement which is the act of reconciling.<sup>xiv</sup>

**People acting according to Kingdom of God principles unawares:** I was asked by a Scripture teacher to help her with some students suffering the tragic effects of muscular dystrophy, at the Beverly Park Orthopaedic Hospital School. She said that they were worried about what had happened to them because they had 'gone cold on death'. At that time (the 1980's) children with muscular dystrophy had a diminished time to live. These children had lost 5 friends within two weeks. They were worried that by the fourth death they were unable to feel deep grief for their departed friend.

Yet some of these children knew many of the principles of God's Kingdom. One older boy said that Jesus had been so good to them. I asked how this could be when they were so disabled by their disease that they would never experience the outside world, unless it was with hospital staff. With true Kingdom of God insight he said, "We experience Jesus love and we are able to help one another. I had to comfort my Grandfather- he is a wealthy man. Grandfather cries when he sees me and he promises to make me better. I comfort him and tell him I am okay- and we are blessed by Jesus here."

So now, when I prepare a children's talk my focus question begins with, "What aspect of the Kingdom of God do the children need to learn? How might they have

experienced God's Kingdom but not have recognised it. For example, my message to a group of children at Northmead Uniting was, "You need to learn to get your own life in order before judging others to fix their lives up". To teach this Jesus' principle I used a white board to draw Jason, a kindergarten boy, with a wart on his nose. Jason was always criticising other kindergarten kids for things like red freckles, sores on their face and so on. Children and adults can relate to kingdom of God experiences when they are paralleled with their own [incipient?] experience of the Kingdom.

**The Kingdom is not to be a secret.** There are those Christians who aren't prepared to live fully by the norms of the Kingdom of God. Some of these Christians discourage others to a narrow Christian perspective by appeals to truth and tradition, possibly because they are resentful of the freedom and peace experienced by those who live with open hearts to the Kingdom of God. I have decided that I will encourage Christians to explore God's Kingdom and to live with enthusiasm within it.

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<sup>i</sup> I cannot remember how I first discovered Moltmann, but I had been impressed with his view that God felt pain, and that God was affected by Jesus' death on the Cross. See Moltmann, J. (1993). *The Crucified God*. Montana: Fortress Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Moltmann, J. 1993. 23.

<sup>iii</sup> Moltmann, J. 1993. 23-24.

<sup>iv</sup> Acts 17:27b- 28, " though he is not far from us. For in him we live and move and have our being." NIV.

<sup>v</sup> Wiesel. E., Night. 1969. p. 75f.

<sup>vi</sup> Moltmann. 1993. pp. 273-275.

<sup>vii</sup> Moltmann. 1993. pp. 273-275.

<sup>viii</sup> Schmemmann. A., (1979) *Church, World, Mission*. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Church, World, Mission, P. 120.

<sup>ix</sup> Schmemmann, A., (1979) *Church, World, Mission*. P. 25.

<sup>x</sup> Groom. (1998) *Sharing Faith*. Oregon: Wipf and Stock publishers. P. p. 150.

<sup>xi</sup> Romans 12 2, "Be not conformed to the this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." NRSV

<sup>xii</sup> Groome p. 150.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bonhoeffer. D., (1995) *Ethics*. New York: Simon and Schuster. p. 36.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bonhoeffer, p. 37.

## **The Kingdom of God** **Behind the Fence and Beyond Offence.** Paul Drury

Driving from the gaol I am listening to my ipod plugged into the radio. Usually I listen to sermons from around the globe that are on podcast, but for the past few days I have had it playing the many songs installed alphabetically. Have you ever noticed how many songs and hymns start with "all"? Half way through the journey, "Amazing Grace", not a particular favourite of mine over the years, begins, and my eyes begin to water.

I'm actually on my way to the grandchildren's house where my wife is preparing dinner. It hit me, the thought of those precious

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little ones, and then the thought of the young man I had been ministering to a few hours earlier. He admitted he is very 'good' at controlling little children for his gratification and admitted he still allows his mind to dream in that direction. We talked about his own history of abuse, being an isolate at school because of a psychological disability and some of his journey of offending. He has had pastoral care from a local church and been prayed for many times and now there was a sense of *"I don't want any more of that, it doesn't work and I am back in again. I know what I am doing is wrong, but who am I, and what avenue for control do I have, if I don't have these urges?"*

After this brief session I had a feeling of powerlessness and grief for the victims, the future victims and this young man.

But Jesus, You asked me to pray, *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* It causes me to wonder, how much of heaven is meant to be manifested here on earth? How much of heaven can I ask to be pulled down to earth? How long do we have to wait for it to manifest in a particular person's life? How long before that person wants the kingdom to manifest in his life? Reading some of the great stories from church history there have been many times where it is more than we have now. Through scripture we know it is even more than has entered our minds (Ephesians 3: 20 – 21).

In this ministry I have become more and more convicted that we are to model our work on Jesus and take seriously His words in John 14 about doing what He did, even greater things than these. So, have I taken offence at not seeing some initial sign of the move of the realm of God in this situation today? Surely, the Lord's Prayer has basically two components; praising and worshiping God out of an intimate, personal relationship and, bringing the reality of His rulership (Kingdom) to earth in terms of material needs, personal relationships and heaven's effect on evil. I look for, and expect, the Kingdom of God to confront sin. I look for, and expect, forgiveness and change to come to the nature that had only known how to sin. Jesus illustrated that when the kingdom meets the demonized, they are set free. When it meets the sick, people are healed. Should I expect/pray for anything less?

We live in a very rationalistic world that wants to explain everything away with science and psychology. I, for many years, wore blinkers regarding the spiritual world because of this, but the gaol has changed me. I have had to deal with too many supernatural experiences by inmates and officers and I cannot

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explain them away as being psychological or drug induced. I am of the firm belief that inmates must address their offending behaviour with psychologists and Alcohol & Other Drugs workers, but, if they do not attend to their spiritual journey I believe they increase their chance of recidivism.

As most of us know the rate of recidivism is much too high for a multitude of reasons, the most prominent being addiction. So, do I take offence at what God hasn't done when an inmate comes back for the third or fourth time since I have been in the gaol, when God hasn't brought all the benefits of the Kingdom of heaven to the earth? I was struck recently by the passage:

Matthew 11:2-6

<sup>2</sup> When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

<sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

John's doubt seems so far removed from the certainty of his proclamation at the Lord's baptism. I think John expected Jesus to 'bring His kingdom with Him', and he must have heard of the restoration of sight, hearing, health and even life. So what was he on about? I believe he saw the kingdom was breaking in, except, a certain person, namely himself, was not being freed from captivity. Thus, Jesus adds a little barb about not taking offence onto the end of His report. It's a reminder to me to constantly give Jesus praise for the things He has done, some of them small and others excitingly large, and not to take offence at the many things not done.

So I treasure glimpses of the Kingdom of God as seen in a letter I recently received from a 'first-time inmate':

*"I have been on remand now for four and half months, when I first arrived at Parklea my cellmate was mean and rude to me. He made things much more difficult than they needed to be, criticizing every move. It was a difficult time.*

*Some people do jail-time easily, I do not. I have only been married for one and half years and my wife is amazing and has totally supported me, visiting me at least once a week. It pains me to think about the distress I have caused her and our friends and families.*

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*As time went by I got moved around the gaol system. My cellmate ended up in a wing next to me. At first I couldn't even bring myself to make eye contact with him but last week he told me that he had family troubles now and to top it off it was his birthday in a couple of days.*

*After attending your sermon about forgiving I spoke to another inmate who I had confided in when I arrived and told him the situation. We made him a birthday cake and gave it to him together. He could not believe what we had done for him, even his wife had not made an effort on his birthday. He thanked us and I guess peace was made.*

*Had I not attended chapel and listened to your words on forgiveness I don't think that I would have had the notion to forgive, but I did!...."*

I thanked God that the kingdom had become visible through, what I would expect was, a very 'ordinary' packet cake made in the microwave oven in the wing.

Last year an inmate came to the chapel with an account of being visited at night by a 'being' dressed in green that seemed to be able to give him some warning of things that did eventually happen. When the inmate was moved to a different block, and also upstairs, this 'being' came floating across the air towards his new window each night and became quite abusive. Mental problems? Probably, but when I suggested he tell it to leave in the name of Jesus he excitedly came the next day and said it was like it got "sucked away". Weeks later it had still not returned.

It is impossible to describe some of the spiritual evil experienced by officers, and their subsequent deliverance from these things, without running the risk of breaking confidences through this publication. I also feel a novice because neither my previous Christian experience nor my training ever prepared me for it. I have found that, as Christians, God gives us the authority to do powerful work through the Spirit of Jesus. For me this is also evidence of the kingdom manifesting itself in the form of joy and peace on earth. In the gaol situation things like this seem to be accentuated. I can't remember anything like this being openly discussed in church circles or at college. Interestingly, I alluded to some supernatural experiences, reported to me by inmates, at a church outside where I was preaching one Sunday. I was amazed at the number of elderly ladies, who you would expect to be so conservative and reserved, come up to me and to say they also have experienced these things. I ponder on how we as the church seem to have an aversion to seeing God as supernatural and also to

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recognizing that there are supernatural forces working against us as well.

I have been, and continue to be, stretched in my spirit regarding the kingdom. God is huge and needs to be released from the 'cell' in which I have often placed Him. I pray that through my ministry in the gaol, the lives that Jesus touches will welcome this huge God into their world. I pray also that I won't take offence when I see God's parole being revoked by myself, or by those I meet on the journey. Maybe within that ridiculous image of putting our omnipresent, supernatural, but ever-loving God in a cell lies the seed of a Kingdom wanting to burst on to earth in the same way as it is in heaven.

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