

T. Austin-Sparks:

We have tried to impart to you something of our strong feeling that we are at a very critical point in the spiritual history of this universe. To anyone who is observing the movement of these times, very little argument or evidence is needed to be brought to them that the movement is a very ominous one. So far as the work of God on this earth is concerned, it is a very serious situation. In different forms, under different names, and in varying degrees of intensity, the whole system of evil - that which is opposed to God - is becoming greatly accentuated; and it is perfectly clear that the effort is greatly increasing to press God out of this world. The place of God, so far as these things are concerned, is to be lessened here; even in those countries which have been called Christian, paganism is gaining the upper hand rapidly, and the mention of God is greatly decreasing. That of course we can see in other parts of the world in very much more intensified forms. What was once an innate tendency, more or less passive, has now become positive and is increasingly so. All this is a tremendous moving together of the one kingdom behind all, to raise the final issue - who is going to be the reigning lord of this creation? I could follow that very much more closely, raising many questions such as that of religious liberty, the freedom of mankind, and so on. But you see the direction of things, and the evil activity, by whatever name it goes. The one upshot of it all is this question of world dominion. We can see clearly that it is resolving itself, not into a number of issues but into one issue - which kingdom is going to prevail? That is a more pressing matter today than ever it was in the history of this world.

All the Lord's people on the earth today stand related to that great issue. So far as we are concerned, we are being brought by the Lord to face it, and it is in that connection that all that has been said and will yet be said in these meditations has its significance.

The Kingdom of God God's Domain

So we stand back from the details to try and focus this thing; and we note that we are set in no less a realm than that of the Divine purpose in creation. What is that? We can only speak of it in very broad terms. We say, then, that it is all gathered up into one phrase - the kingdom of God. We are so familiar with the phrase that I think we may have failed really to grasp what it means. Well, to begin with, the kingdom of God is God's domain; and the domain of God expresses Himself. It must be that. The principle running through the whole Bible is that. Wherever God will be, that sphere must be conformed to Himself, it must take its character from Him, it must express His own mind, it must express what He is Himself. The kingdom of God is God's domain which is expressive of Himself, which takes its character from Him, in which everything to the smallest detail speaks of God, shows what God is like.

The Blessedness of the Kingdom

It speaks of God, and therefore, taking its character from Him and becoming expressive of Him, it is filled with the blessedness of God; I know of no better word than that. You know there is a little fragment, which unfortunately is mistranslated in our version, "the gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim. 1:11), which is, literally, 'the gospel of the happy God.' You can retranslate what is called the Sermon on the Mount in that way, not, "Blessed are..." these and those and those, but "Happy..." The Sermon on the Mount is, as you know, the setting forth of the moral foundation of the Kingdom, and it all represents a very blessed state of things, so that, when God's kingdom is really established and spread over all, it is full of the blessedness of God. It is not just an imperious, despotic reign and rule of God the All-Terrible. The kingdom of God is a very blessed kingdom, and everybody in it is a very blessed, a very happy, person; and that lies back of the very existence of creation - the intention of God to extend His kingdom.

The Extension of the Kingdom on this Earth

This may, in part, be a speculation, because we do not know the condition of other planets and worlds. It may be that that very blessed state always exists there, seeing that God created all. It may be that this planet is the prodigal, that it has swung out of its spiritual orbit and lost the Kingdom and has to be restored. That is speculation because we do not know, therefore we have to use this phrase 'the extension of the Kingdom' with a certain amount of reservation; but I think we are not wrong in using it in this way - that God, so far as this world was concerned, was set upon extending His kingdom; that this world is the extension of the kingdom of God which we have just defined, and that God created it to be in some particular way a representation and expression of His kingdom; in its spiritual character, to give a manifestation of Himself. There is a great deal gathered into that, of course, which we cannot stay to speak about. The very fact that it was upon this earth that God became incarnate - with all that followed, God being in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself - and all

the wonderful revelation that has been given to us as to what God is going to do on and by means of and toward this earth, does at least suggest that the kingdom of God has some particular and peculiar application to the world in which you and I live.

But our present purpose is to indicate the intention of God which has been made unmistakably clear by revelation - that the kingdom of God is the object and motive lying behind this creation; and the kingdom of God is that of which we have spoken - His domain, taking its character from Him, and filled therefore with the blessedness of God Himself.

But the kingdom of God is the sphere which is ruled by God - not under delegated government, but under His own personal government; and therefore infinite wisdom, infinite love and infinite power are the governing factors of His kingdom.

Infinite wisdom is a governing factor in the kingdom of God; wisdom far, far outstripping all the accumulated wit and understanding and knowledge of man to fathom; yes, infinite wisdom. Infinite love, for God is love; and infinite power. Well, that lies behind. That is the kingdom of God in the meaning of this creation.

The Kingdom on Earth Entrusted and Betrayed

(a) The First Adam

But we move to that terrible scene when that kingdom, for its realisation, had to be entrusted to man. Seeing that it is a moral kingdom - not just a mechanical one, not something brought about by the sovereign determination of God irrespective of man's response - man had to co-operate by his own free will. We know how God committed the interests of His kingdom to man - in a sense, made man the custodian of His great purposes; and then the tragedy of the great betrayal, where man failed Him and betrayed His interests into the hands of a hostile one of whom we have spoken in our previous meditations, who had purposed in his heart to usurp God's place, and who, finding that that did not work, determined that he would have a counter kingdom to God's. Man betrayed the trust into the hands of that rival, so that, for the time being, the kingdom of God, so far as this creation is concerned, was suspended. But God did not abandon His intention because of the betrayal; so that, although the whole race which should have been the sphere of the realization of that Divine kingdom had been betrayed into those other hands, God moved in relation to His intention to take out of that race a people.

(b) Israel

We know the movement of God - first one man, then a family, a tribe, a nation; an elect nation in which all the meaning of the kingdom of God was to be illustrated in principle. It is a very wonderful thing to recognise fully the significance of that elect nation, that chosen people, that nation out from the nations but not reckoned among the nations. Why did God choose Israel? - in order to give in the midst of the nations a demonstration, an illustration, of the kingdom of God; a temporal and partial, but nevertheless a very true, expression of the kingdom of God, where the government is theocratic, and where God, having things according to His own mind and being able to express Himself, shows what a blessed thing it is for man to live under that government; for there is that side of Israel's history which is a wonderful, even if imperfect, expression of what God means His whole domain to be. You hear of a land flowing with milk and honey and all that there was therein; you see that people really settled in the great days of their national history with overflowing wealth, with prosperity, with everything abounding unto them in that Divinely-chosen land of unexampled productiveness. It was indeed the centre of the earth, selected by God because it could, in a temporal way, set forth something of what things could be like if God were all. In the greatest days of Israel's history - the time of Solomon - the land was overflowing with wealth. Read those chapters telling of the gold and the silver and the precious stones and all the fulness that there was in that kingdom. It is a wonderful story. Why? Simply because God is seeking to show in temporal and imperfect terms, but in such a way as to be better than anything else known in the history of this world, what the whole domain of God will be when His kingdom is established; and so He chose a nation, in order that in that nation - as far as could be in conditions such as those which exist spiritually in this universe - there should be some faint reflection and indication of what the kingdom of God is, where God is all in all.

But that nation failed; they too betrayed God - and into the hands of the same enemy; for the cry of the prophets throughout was against the idolatry of Israel, and idolatry is, in principle and background, control by the evil powers in this universe. God was betrayed again; but He was not defeated, He did not give up. He was moving in relation to His original intention.

The Kingdom Secured Spiritually in the Last Adam

We go on through His movements to the greatest event of all - the advent of His Son. "The final Adam to the... rescue came"; with Him and in Him the Kingdom. And He was not now dealing with temporal things, with earthly conditions. In the first place He was going to the root of the matter, to the primary causes, not the secondary, as we saw in our previous meditation; getting right back behind everything, in His Cross dealing with principalities and powers and the whole world system of evil rulership. We have yet to see more about that.

But from that point we find the new movement in relation to the Kingdom. It is not merely temporal and earthly; that is, it is not just a matter of time and of things here. It is that ultimate realm of the Kingdom. The new movement from that time is a spiritual one in relation to the Kingdom. The kingdom of God has come. Where has it come? It has come in Christ. And where is Christ? He has come into a Body, a spiritual Body, the Church which is His Body. That is the new elect, and yet the eternally elect, nation for this purpose; not an earthly thing, not a thing of time, not a thing now of temporal matters such as gold and silver and precious stones. Let the religious systems, whether called by Christian titles or not, be interested in what is ornate and luxurious on this earth, to make an impression; that is not the kingdom of God. "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink" (Rom. 14:17). This kingdom is spiritual, and it is now embodied in the Christ corporate; He Himself being Head of His Body the Church, the eternally elect Body. This is not some after-thought of God, something that has arisen because everything else has failed. God is not a God of dispensations, a God of then and now, but He is in the eternal Now. With Him a million years hence are as yesterday. He, from the beginning, foresaw, foreknew, foredetermined, predestinated. Those are the great words we come upon when we come to this particular vessel of His eternal purpose. So, in the fulness of time, Christ personally comes, and then constitutes for Himself a Body, and in that Body the kingdom of God from eternity is constituted.

God All in All

How? On what ground? That is God's first sphere of domain where He is all in all, where the devil has no place, nor man as such. That is the great meaning of the Cross at which we are trying to get, where no systems of men are the ruling things, where God is all in all. You must remember that that is the end toward which everything is moving. It is moving through and by Christ in the first instance, and then through Christ through His Church, back to God complete. "...he shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father;... that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

That is the setting in which we are found. God is all in all, to begin with. Is He? Well, that is the whole battleground of our inner life. It was that point which we reached in our previous meditation. There we shall resume later on, if He wills. But it is the question, first of all, of God being all in all, the Lord being Lord, and there being no other lordship - the lordship of our will, our likes, our dislikes, our preferences, our prejudices, our selectivenesses, and all that belongs to us - that rises up and disputes the place and way and will of God. No other feature must have lordship, but He must be Lord of all. I do not expect literally to see Jesus Christ riding on a white horse with a name written on His garment, "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords." I believe that is a symbol of the great spiritual truth that He will ride in majesty as Lord of Lords; He will trample down every other lordship and bring it into subjection to Himself, and - metaphorically, but none the less very truly - ride forth triumphantly as King. That is the end, and that absolute supremacy which He has attained He will hand up to the Father, for the Father's ultimate satisfaction in accordance with the purpose which He purposed before the foundation of the world. The whole question of the kingdom of God is resolved in the very first instance into an inward matter in the case of every believer, as to whether He is Lord.

I said just now that that is the battleground in which we find ourselves continually; but, blessed be God, it is not all defeat! There is the mighty energy of the Spirit of God that makes it possible for us to cry - "when I fall, I shall arise" (Micah 7:8). That is not the assertion of self-assurance and self-sufficiency, but of faith that knows there is a power that worketh in us. The mighty energy of the Spirit of God is working the powers of the Kingdom in us, the powers of a coming age.

The Kingdom of God Within and in the Midst

And those powers are firstly spiritual, to bring this about. You and I, in this terrible conflict between the two kingdoms which is focused in our very souls - you and I, frail, faulty, a thousand times failing and slipping and blundering and erring - are nevertheless being carried on by a power and an energy that is not our own, that will bring us finally to the place of absolute ascendancy over the powers that are set against us. God is working that out in us; it is His kingdom. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, is within you. It is an inward matter; that is where it begins. And it is in the midst of you - which expresses the corporate setting of the Kingdom; in

the midst of the Church, a people secured and constituted by God and in whom first of all His absolute lordship shall be established.

I must add a word about the other aspect - that the Church is a people in whom the blessedness of God is known. Well, there is a sense in which that is true, but not true enough of us yet. The pressure and the intensity of this great spiritual warfare does register upon us, it does take its toll. This persistent determination of the enemy to wear us out leaves its mark, and we are not too characterised by the blessedness of God's kingdom. But it does break out sometimes. We sing some of those songs of Zion together, we speak of the great day of Christ's soon appearing, we remind ourselves of all the wonders of His Cross - 'Oh, the sweet wonders of that Cross' - and when we dwell upon these things the glory of His kingdom does well up; it shows itself from time to time. Perhaps that is one of the great blessednesses of Christian fellowship. We gather in meetings and in the Spirit, and the real nature of the Kingdom does come up and show itself. It is there, and more or less it is abidingly there, consciously there, all the time; but we are conscious too that we are up against things, we are in a grim fight. Yet in this kingdom we have to know more and more of the blessedness of God, the happiness of God. We must rebuke ourselves for what contradicts that and remind ourselves that, after all, we are a very happy people. "Happy is the people whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 144:15).

The Church to Administer and Manifest the Kingdom

But then the matter does not end there. Israel were a chosen nation, not to be an end in themselves, but to display to all the nations what the kingdom of God is, and to administer that kingdom in the midst of the nations. There were times when other nations got the benefits of Israel. When they were not against Israel, when they were amenable or favourable, great blessings came to them because of Israel, and so it has been since then. I am not at all sure that we have not derived a great deal of blessing in this country because of the attitude in past years toward that nation - even in their rejection. "I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse" (Gen. 12:3); and that holds good. But in a very direct way, when Israel were according to God's mind, in line with Him, people were blessed because of them. And the Church is not an end in itself. We find in "Revelation" the end - the city is in its place of administration, and it is the nations that are deriving the benefit. The light of the nations, the leaves for the health of the nations, the water for the life of the nations, issue from that city. The Church, then, is to be so constituted as to be God's instrument of administration and manifestation of His kingdom.

The Practical Issue - Ascendancy over the Kingdom of Darkness

But while we are set in that as the ultimate, and all the practical questions and challenges and issues bound up with that have to be brought home to our hearts, the whole matter resolves itself for the time being into one of registering all that is meant by the kingdom of God, the mighty sovereignty of God in Jesus Christ, not now so much upon kings and rulers of this earth as upon those principalities and powers and world rulers of this darkness, those spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies. That is where we are brought to, and if I were to gather into one statement what I believe to be the Divine intention in our present meditations it is this - to seek to bring us, as amongst that people, to the place where we count infinitely more in the spiritual realm than we now do, where we have to be reckoned with by the powers of evil back of this world system. It is there that value to God is decided in this dispensation.

Now you can reject all that we are saying and still be saved. In order to be saved, all that you need is to "believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). With that you can go to heaven, you can be delivered from condemnation and from hell, without having any of this that we are talking about. Well, if that is all you want, you can have it. But I ask you this, are you as concerned to be useful to God as you are to be saved? That is another question. The matter of your value to God is decided here - what account are you to Him in the realm of the spiritual forces in this universe which are opposed to Him? How much account does the devil take of you? How much are you a menace to his kingdom? Not, how many services and meetings are you taking, how many addresses are you giving, how much running about are you doing; not all those etceteras in Christian activity; but how much impact do you register upon that dark, evil kingdom? It is just there that your value to God is decided. Well, if the devil gives you a very bad time and has made you know you are a marked man, a marked woman, take comfort; it shows you are of some value to God. But we do not always remember that. We have terribly bad times under the hand of the devil and get under them, we think how terrible and wicked he is, we get occupied with that, and forget - perhaps it is a kind of humility - that we must mean something, after all. That is where things count with God in this dispensation. It is not how many structures you can put up nor how big an organisation you can create on this earth, it is not anything in the temporal realm at all. It is, in all, through all, by all, how much is counting against the kingdom which is opposed to the kingdom of God? That is the challenge which we must seriously face.

The Kingdom Present in Principle Now

The kingdom of God is something very much more vital than we have realised. Oh, what a pity that men have so systematized this thing as to rob it of its real spiritual value! Some tell us, for instance, that the Kingdom is for a coming age, that this is not the Kingdom age. That is not true. The kingdom of God is a present issue, the supreme issue of this whole creation; and it is concerning that that all the forces of darkness, under whatever name they may be working on this earth, are converging under one evil, spiritual government and overlord - to make it impossible for the kingdom of God to be established and extended in this creation. Well, Christian people know it. The big question in missionary magazines now is whether we can go on with our work in many places, whether we must withdraw, whether there is any prospect for extending in the future. Doors are closing. But what about God's kingdom? Is He Lord? Is He going to be pushed out of His universe? Well, the picture that the Word of God gives at the end is not that, but just the opposite. That is the battle we are in. It is a spiritual one, after all. The Lord bring home to our hearts the seriousness of the challenge, and help us to see that now it is a personal matter; the kingdom of God is a personal matter.