

T. Austin-Sparks:

"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

Overshadowing and encompassing all else in the Bible, and especially in the new Testament, is the phrase: "the kingdom of God". "John the Baptist [cometh], preaching... saying... the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1,2). Jesus preached it and taught it and said that it had come nigh (Matt. 4:17). Before His transfiguration He had said that there were some there who would not see death until they saw the Kingdom coming in power (Mark 9:1). After His resurrection He spoke with His disciples about the Kingdom (Acts 1:3).

This was the theme, too, of the apostles. Paul himself spoke of it to those in Rome as late as his imprisonment: right up to the end, it would seem, it was concerning 'the Kingdom of God, and the things of Jesus Christ', that he spoke (Acts 28:31). The letter to the Hebrews is summed up in one phrase: "Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken..." (Heb. 12:28) literally, 'being in the course of receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken'. That explains all that is in that letter. And the book of the Revelation itself can be gathered into one sentence: "Now is come... the kingdom of our God..." (Rev. 12:10).

All this amounts to a very full, strong and comprehensive statement, and it is therefore surely necessary for us to acquaint ourselves with the meaning of the Kingdom of God. At the outset, therefore, let us spend a little time in defining the Kingdom of God, for we must be clear on this matter of definition.

A DEFINITION

What is the Kingdom of God? It is generally agreed that the word 'kingdom' is not a very good translation of the Greek word which lies behind it. The root meaning of the original word translated 'kingdom' in our English Bibles is 'sovereign rule', or 'reign', so that it should be more correctly translated 'the sovereign rule of God', and we must keep that in mind all the way along. We shall go on using the word 'kingdom', for we shall find it difficult to get away from it, but let us be very clear that, when we are using the word 'kingdom' in this connection, we are thinking and talking about the sovereign rule or reign of God.

Now, in the light of the teaching of the New Testament, this has three aspects.

Firstly, it does mean the kingly rule of God. Then it leads on to an order or nature of things characteristic of the One who rules. Note how it is to be: the one LEADS ON to the other. The latter condition is not always present. God rules: that is a fact in itself; but that is sovereign rule where over a very large area there is nothing characteristic of God, nothing which sets forth the nature of God. But the fact and truth of God ruling LEADS ON to the next thing, and that is an order which takes its character from Him who rules. That is what it is intended to lead to, and in the New Testament you will find that that has a large place, as we shall see later.

And then, going one stage further, the sovereign reign or rule of God leads to an actual realm in which that order and nature operates and is expressed. This is something into which you can enter, but you cannot enter it apart from the other two things: the fact of His absolute Lordship, and the fact that you, by some mighty work of God, have become a 'partaker of the Divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4) - the very nature of God has been introduced and a new order of things has been set up.

That is the definition of the Kingdom of God. It is very important, because I hope you are going to be led to a new reading of all that is in the Word about the Kingdom, and you will be in confusion unless you have clearly grasped that definition in its threefold aspect.

It hardly needs to be said that the 'Kingdom of God' and the 'Kingdom of Heaven' are not in any sense two different things. Matthew prefers the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. There is a very good reason why Matthew preferred the title 'the Kingdom of Heaven', the sovereign rule of Heaven - or rather of the heavens, for the word is not in the singular, it is in the plural. Mark, Luke and John always call it the 'Kingdom of God' - again, for very good reasons, into which I leave you to dig. But the two titles denote the same thing.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD PRESENT

Now, we are expressly told by John the Baptist and by the Lord Himself that the Kingdom of God or of Heaven was "at hand", was "nigh", had "drawn nigh". On one occasion the Lord put it "...is come nigh unto you" (Luke

10:9) on another, "...is in the midst of you", or "within you" (Luke 17:21). And, as we have already quoted, before His transfiguration the Lord said, 'There are some here who in their lifetime will see it come in power'. So we are told that it is present. But we may not perhaps realise what a tremendous amount hangs upon that statement. A whole system of teaching has arisen which says that the Kingdom has been suspended and will come in with the Jewish age later on. But John said, 'It is at hand'. Jesus said, 'It has come nigh'. Jesus said, 'You shall see it come in power in your lifetime', and, 'The Kingdom is in the midst of you' - 'IS in the midst of you'. It is present.

But here a question arises. If the sovereign rule of God and of the heavens is universal and eternal, as the Bible declares it to be - in the book of Daniel the phrase which governs everything is "the heavens DO rule" - in what way is it more particularly so in this dispensation? God is the Ruler of the universe, and always has been and always will be. How is He more so in this dispensation than at any other time? In other words, in what way is the kingdom at hand, or has it come nigh, in THIS dispensation? And the answer is a very full, a very comprehensive and a very wonderful one.

The Kingdom of God was always, by Divine appointment, the heritage of God's Son. God purposed that Kingdom for His Son as His inheritance. Through Him, by Him, He made all things, and unto Him were all things created (Rom. 13:36; Col. 1:16). But, further, it was intended to be man's in union with God's Son. There is much about that. "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the Son of man, that thou puttest him in charge? ...Thou madest him to have dominion..." (Ps. 8:4,6). "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). This is not something extra. It was eternally in the thought of God for man, to be realised through union with His Son. Man was in the picture from the beginning - man was created for that very purpose.

And that very truth opens the door for the tragedy. By man's act and by man's consent, by man's rebellion against the expressed will of God, the Kingdom passed into the hands of a usurper. Yes: the dominion over this world passed into the hands of one who is, even by the Lord Jesus Himself, designated 'the prince of this world' (John 14:30), and by Paul 'the god of this age' (2 Cor. 4:4). It went into alienation from its rightful Heir - and from man in union with Christ as a joint-heir - it went into alienation, which demanded restoration. It went into enmity against God, which demanded reconciliation. It went into captivity, demanding release. It went into moral ruin, demanding reconstitution. There is the answer to the question as to why in this dispensation the Kingdom has a particular meaning.

THE KINGDOM AT HAND WITH THE COMING OF THE HEIR

Thus, you see, the Kingdom, or the rule, in all its meaning as we have defined it, came to hand with the appearance of its rightful Heir. This dispensation is covered and dominated by the fact of the Son of God having become incarnate. As the Heir of all things, He has come to seek and to save that which was lost - and it was an immense 'that'. So the Kingdom or the sovereign rule has come into this dispensation, in this particular and peculiar way, with the Person of Jesus Christ, God's Son, the rightful Heir. It has also come in with Him as the alone Redeemer of the inheritance, the only One who could redeem, the redeeming Kinsman who alone had the position and the right and the resource to redeem - the "Son of man". And so the Kingdom has come near in the person and the work of the Lord Jesus, and this phrase, "the Kingdom of God", defines, explains and sums up the whole meaning and purpose of the incarnation and the mission of the Lord Jesus.

Do you say, Why was God's Son made man? Why did He come in the flesh? Why did He come into this world, and then why did He suffer and die and rise again? The answer is: In order that the sovereign rule of God might be recovered, restored, reconstituted, the enmity dealt with and reconciliation made, the captivity broken, release brought in. You will no doubt be recalling much Scripture in support of this. "To proclaim release unto the captives..." (Is. 61:1): that was His mission - to reconstitute things from their moral ruin. We may consider this more fully later. What is called 'the Sermon on the Mount' is, as Dr. Campbell Morgan calls it, 'the whole manifesto' of the Kingdom of God: it shows what the Kingdom of God is like - the constitution of it in moral principle.

So, He came, and He finished His work to recover and secure His own God-given inheritance of the Kingdom; and, rising from the dead, He says: "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18) - literally it is, 'has just been given to me' - and from that moment all authority is vested in the Name of Jesus. The remainder of the New Testament is the demonstration of that fact. The book of the Acts, from the beginning onward, sets forth in a very, very concrete and forceful way the authority of the Name. "By what power, or in what name...?" was the interrogation. 'If you ask concerning the Name, be it known unto you that by the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...' (Acts 4:7-10). The authority is not only claimed by the Lord Jesus, but

demonstrated by Him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

CHRIST'S WAS A 'COSMIC' MISSION

This inheritance was something very comprehensive. The mission of the Lord Jesus was, if I may use the word, cosmic: that is to say, it did not just relate to the earth as the beginning and the end. It had to do with the whole spiritual sphere in which this earth moves. Paul defines that as: 'principalities, powers, world-rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies' (Eph. 6:12). There is much more of that kind, and that is what we mean by 'cosmic'. It is supra-earthly, if you like - the whole spiritual setting of everything here. In that whole realm of the heavens which were polluted and defiled, the mission of the Lord Jesus was efficacious and effectual; it was not only for man on the earth and for the earthly creation. The very heavens had to be purged, we are told (Job 15:15; Heb. 9:23). Yes, the inheritance is a large inheritance. His rule, His sovereign rule, is a very, very great thing. It moves out into the vast expanses where these hosts of evil spirits have their sphere of operations. His rule is there, it is extended there.

But, of course, it operates also amongst men. That hardly needs to be said, and certainly not emphasized. I refer again to the book of the Acts. But was the book of the Acts ever finished? It is the one book in the Bible which has no finish. It just breaks off. How we would like to know the rest! But no, it just breaks off; it leaves Paul there on his chain in Rome, tells us no more. Ah, but, you see, the book of the Acts was never intended to be finished until the end of this dispensation. It has gone on and on, and it is still having chapters added to it, and it is still on the same lines with the same meaning - the sovereign rule of the Lord Jesus and His securing of His inheritance by His own authority. But for His authority nothing would come to Him. You and I know quite well that we cannot just bring people into the Kingdom willy-nilly. It requires the exercise of the very throne of the Lord Jesus to bring a soul through by new birth. And those who are receiving the Kingdom, that is, those who are still 'in course of receiving' the Kingdom, know quite well that every inch of this territory is contested, and that we never come into one extra fragment of our inheritance in Christ without some exercise of His sovereign power.

A REDEMPTIVE MISSION

Christ's mission was also a redemptive mission. How great does that word 'redemption' become, when we view it in the light of this whole purpose of God as to the place of His Son universally. Not only men and women, but the whole earth and the whole cosmos, redeemed by the Blood of Jesus. The day will come when the glory of that redemption will be manifested universally.

A RECONSTRUCTIVE MISSION

Then the mission of Jesus was reconstructive. That, of course, is spread right over the New Testament. What is He doing with you, with me, with His own who have come under His sovereign rule? What is happening to those of us who have come under the Lordship of God in Christ? We are just being reconstructed, that is all, and we are learning as we go along how much we need reconstructing. Things have all broken down, all gone wrong. We cannot put them right. Something has to be done to reconstruct this whole fabric. Hence, all the dealings with us by the Spirit of God, in trials and testings, in afflictions and adversities and sufferings, are reconstructive works unto the Kingdom of God. They often seem to be destructive works - and it is true that you have got to get rid of the rubbish, of the debris, before you can build; the two things are two parts of the one thing - but, you see, the receiving of the Kingdom comes through afflictions.

Is it not stated quite clearly and definitely: "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22)? Now go beyond the primary idea of a sphere as interpreting the Kingdom, and see that the tribulations are bringing you into that sovereign rule of the Lord, which is going to prove itself so beneficent, so glorious, so wonderful. You agree with me that it would be a grand and glorious thing if everything were just as God would have it. That is what He is working toward with you and me. 'Through much tribulation we enter the Kingdom': we are coming into the inheritance, we are coming into the sovereign rule.

THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM

So much for the explanation of the term 'the Kingdom of God'. What is the inclusive issue? "This gospel of the kingdom" - 'This GOOD NEWS of the sovereign rule of God'. The sovereign rule of God is good news! That comprehended the whole message of the apostles and of the Church for this dispensation. It is the good news of the Kingdom - the good news that the Throne exists and is occupied and is dominant. The good news, to begin with, in the most elementary aspect of the proclaiming, is that there is a Throne, and on that Throne is

Jesus Christ; that the authority is vested in Him, and that that authority is a very real thing: and that the Holy Spirit is working all things in us and in this world in relation to the authority or Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Take an illustration from the Old Testament - Israel in Babylon, that great, immense world power; a people broken, shattered, crushed, ground to powder, in despair. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137:4). They hung their harps upon the willows in the hopelessness of the situation. But listen! A prophet is speaking. "For your sake I have sent to Babylon, and I will bring down all their nobles" (Is. 43:14, R.V. Mg.). "For your sake" - "for your sake" - a broken, crushed, hopeless people. This overthrow and destruction of one of the mightiest empires that this world has seen has an explanation in a poor, despised, broken, captive people.

Now bring that up to date, and realise that this Throne is operating now in history. Mighty world powers are going to be shattered and broken and disintegrated because of the Church. Antichrist will be given his tether. He will be allowed to 'exalt himself above all that is called God, sitting in the temple of God, giving out that he is God' (2 Thess. 2:4). How much further can anyone go than that? Antichrist will be given liberty to go even as far as that. But then he will be smitten and destroyed by the very countenance of Christ Himself. For the authority of Christ to be displayed in all its intrinsic power, it is necessary that all this other be allowed. The Devil is allowed to go a long way, but behind there is always the Throne. The Throne is saying, 'Go as far as you can, and then I will destroy you out of hand.' That is the good news of the sovereignty.

What we have said so far is but an introduction, but I trust that it may help towards a new understanding of this wonderful phrase - "the kingdom of God" - and I believe that we shall be thrilled as we look more deeply into it. But let us be quite clear about this. That Kingdom has come, that Kingdom is present; that Kingdom, in spite of all that seems to be working to the contrary, is functioning. That One at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens is Lord, and this is something to be apprehended by faith, and stood upon in the day of ordeal.

For surely it was that assurance and confidence, that certainty, that accounted for the wonderful stability of the Apostles and the Church at the beginning, when it seemed so otherwise. Is it not this that has astonished us, and perhaps perplexed us? Here is all this persecution, all this martyrdom, all this seeming triumph of evil and of evil men and of the Devil, and yet these people do not bow inwardly to it, they do not accept it. Whether they be individuals, or whether it be the Church, they just do not accept that this is the last word and that this is the supreme power. They repudiate it, even to death. Why? There is no other answer than this, that they had come to a fixed and final position about the exaltation of the Lord Jesus to the Throne in the heavens. It was a settled thing, and it was so real in their hearts that nothing that this other could do could ultimately destroy them. They go to their deaths singing in triumph.

It is easy to speak glibly of these things: and yet - and yet - is it not true that the Lord has special reserves of grace for special ordeals? If ever you feel that you could not go through a certain trial, that if you had to face that, you just could not go through with it, you are taking on something that you have no right to take on. If the Lord calls you to go through fire or water, He has a special reserve of grace for you in that. And that grace will be from the THRONE of grace. "Let us... draw near with boldness to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may FIND grace to help us in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). It is a throne above, mediating grace for need and suffering as it is required.