

The Reign of God in Jesus' Life and Our Lives

"If we want to talk about Jesus – what he wanted, and who he was – we must speak first and above all about the reign of God." (Gerhard Lohfink in Jesus of Nazareth)

As a Jew, what did Jesus mean by "reign of God?"

- First of all it is the dynamic presence of God in action; it is also the locus wherever God's dynamic presence is happening
- From the time of King David Jews described their relationship with God as a society where God's kingship was visible. It was not something purely internal in individuals nor was it primarily a future reality.
- The phrase "kingdom of heaven" in Jesus' time referred to the reign of God; they did not want to use the name God so they used the word heaven.
- God's reign is manifested in specific ways God intervenes in history and people's lives

to sustain, redeem and create new life. God demonstrates God's reign through direct action and the reign is both present and becoming a fuller reality.

- Jesus believed that God's reign was not a future event but was actually entering into the lives of his people in the present and in very specific ways

Jesus and John the Baptist

- Both Jesus and John were convinced that Israel had strayed from their covenant with God and that God was intervening to restore and redeem the people of God. Like Jeremiah, Jesus and John scorned the attitude that nothing could threaten "sons of Abraham." They challenged the status quo. God is acting now!
- John emphasized the need for a corporate repentance that must include individual recognition, through the sign of baptism, of the need to turn from sins to avert God's judgment on Israel as a whole. John offered hope if the people would repent, but proclaimed that without repentance

judgment was immanent and failure to act would result in pain and destruction.

- Jesus affirmed John's awareness that God was intervening in the life of Israel and that repentance was essential. He, too, was baptized and exhorted people to "Repent and believe the gospel." Yet Jesus realized that the manner of God's intervention was through offering an opportunity to become part of God's compassionate involvement in the lives of people rather than a fear-filled life-denying judgment. In essence Jesus "good news" was: "Become part of God's loving and powerful intervention in the lives of people." This is what Jesus called "the reign of God."

Jesus Primary mission was to proclaim that the reign of God was breaking into the lives of the people of Israel (the good news) and he invited people to join him in what God was doing (salvation). Jesus was announcing A NEW SOCIETY.

- Jesus announced that the reign of God has already begun and the life it brings is for all persons.
- The initiative for bringing about the reign of God is **God's activity in peoples lives.**
- The presence of the reign of God brings forth salvation (wholesome life) and calls for the response of repentance. "Repent and believe the gospel" means turn and place yourself in the reality of what God is doing.
- The reign of God has come, as all the prophets promised; it is present NOW, but not yet completed because it requires the people's response and collaboration.
- Jesus' union with God and God's desires enabled him to see God's presence and reign as a present reality, both in his life and in the lives of people around him.

Jesus sayings and parables were used to awaken people to the reality of the Reign of God in their midst, to describe what it was like, and to challenge them to participate in what God was doing.

- It is essential to approach Jesus' sayings and parables in the context of first-century Jewish life. What Jesus said had only one purpose: to call attention to what he was DOING and to invite people to share in the manifestation of God's reign.
- His sayings, such as those collected in the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount, are not esoteric wisdom teaching for a select group. They were directed to all people and speak to very specific needs in their lives. For example, they describe what happens in the Reign of God:
 - "Blessed are you who are poor; for your is the reign of God!"
 - "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."
 - "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh!"

These are words to people who struggled to make ends meet, put food on the table, and who weep because they have been marginalized, lost all hope for decent living. They feel helpless. Jesus is

proclaiming that CHANGE is coming. There is no hidden mystery in these saying. They are clear and offer both hope and challenge. They are directed to specific situations in the lives of people.

- Jesus' "parables of the kingdom" are directed, also, to specific situations and are filled with images that people in his culture would recognize from daily life. They were not embedded with hidden or esoteric meaning. Sometimes the images were so clear that people turned away from Jesus or plotted to kill him! Some examples:
 - In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-9) Jesus speaks to persons who are farmers or familiar with growing wheat. The reign of God is like sowing and the way wheat germinates. The single seed produces a shoot above and below the ground. While the visible shoot is growing so are up to five shoots below ground that will eventually break ground. On average, there

will be three shoots above ground each producing about thirty grains. Thus the harvest may be thirty, sixty, or close to one-hundred-fold. The reign of God is working, even when only a small part is visible. But some seeds of the reign will be devoured by those who do not want it to grow.

- The parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29) points to one truth that is difficult to accept. The reign of God cannot be forced or controlled by human beings. Human beings do not create the reign of God through their actions or energy. We are invited to enter the reign and depend totally on God for its fruition. Jesus uses this parable to make this point because in his day (unlike ours) people could plant and harvest, but they did not know how or why seeds grow to maturity.
- The double parable of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44-46) demonstrates two simple and profound aspects of the reign of God. It is based on something every hearer would know: people hid their treasures for

safekeeping. The first half depicts a field worker (who owns little or nothing) who discovers a treasure and in joy sells all he has to buy the field. The second half depicts a wealthy merchant who finds a valuable pearl and sells all he has to buy it. The parable emphasizes that the reign of God includes all kinds of people and that when a person discovers the presence of God's reign it brings great joy and passion to give everything to become part of the reign of God. The parables are about the inclusiveness of the reign and the joy and passion (the attitudes) that are necessary to become part of the reign. There is no room for half-hearted response or participation.

- The challenge of the reign of God exhorts an immediate response not from duty, **but from joyful desire and passion.**

The reign of God and the People of God today

- Using the meanings Jesus intended to convey to people in his culture we can learn the implications and challenges of his first-century

message for our lives today. We should be very cautious and disciplined so that we do not force our modern perspective on Jesus sayings and parables about the reign of God. We must try, as best we can, to apply Jesus' meanings and challenges to our lives, rather than determine what message or wisdom we think they convey from our twenty-first century point of view. Also, we must keep in mind that his sayings and parables are simple and for every person; they are not generic wisdom-for-living-good-lives, nor are they esoteric teaching filled with mystery for those who are enlightened.

- Jesus made it clear that the reign of God is **both** a present reality and at the same time has not yet been fulfilled. How can this be? Jesus had a simple response. First, God is already at work in the world; the reign is here! Second, the reign of God is not fully present because so many of us refuse to become involved or are partially involved. We are the ones who make God's reign a "not yet"; in order for the reign to be a complete reality we must be involved.

- The reign of God has a future dimension because it will not “come” until human beings accept its reality and become involved in it with their lives.
- The Christian communities must accept the “today” of the reign of God in order to fulfill its reason for being and its mission. The reign of God is not primarily a future event or place; it is not “pie in the sky after we die.”
- The fundamental aspect of the reign of God is humility. Jesus’ passion and death show an integral part of the meaning and nature of the reign of God. The reign of God requires humble sacrifice and dying to self; sometimes physical death.
- The reign of God has a “time”; it is now and it is also coming into being. But the reign of God also has a “place.” The place that manifests the reign of God is **The people of God.**
- Like the call of Abraham, the reign of God begins in a small way and grows from that place and person.
- The reign of God requires a naked and total dependence on God. It is a present reality.

- The reign of God is intended for all human beings; it begins, with Jesus and his people (the Israel of God), and will expand to be a blessing for all people and nations.
- The call of Israel, and the mission of Jesus and his followers, is for the purpose of extending God's reign and salvation to all people. **The reign of God is the lure of divine love!**