

St. Macarius Contemplative Community
Lenten Series 2014 : Part One

Stay Close to Jesus

**Jesus's life demonstrates authentic human life
and reveals the nature of God**

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Jesus' teaching on prayer flows from his own life of prayer and his awareness that God is acting through him to make God's kingdom tangible in people's lives. That is his "gospel." And these aspects of Jesus' life show us what authentic human life is meant to be and gives glimpses of what God is like.

Jesus moves from discernment in the desert to active and compassionate engagement in people's lives:

- Worships and preaches in synagogue in Nazareth (it does not fit into the status quo)
- Worships in Capernaum synagogue, heals a paralyzed man and Peter's mother-in-law
- "I must go to the other towns and declare the good news of God's kingdom."
- Raises of son of the widow at Nain"
- Casts out demons
- Heals lepers and a woman with an issue of blood
- Heals a centurion's servant

How can the Kingdom of God be recognized? When Is It “Here”?

Jesus used two images to describe the presence of the kingdom. His words were directed to those closest to him as they walked throughout Galilee:

“Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”
(Matthew 13:16-17)

In another context, possibly when the inner disciples returned from their healing and preaching mission and said, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”, Jesus replies: “I was watching Satan fall like the lightning from heaven!” Then Jesus adds: “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of God, but for others they are in parables so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not hear.” (Luke 8:10)

What is going on here????

- Jesus is making it clear that the Kingdom of Heaven is not an abstract or philosophical concept or esoteric place. It is real and can be experienced in time and space by human senses and experience! At the same time a person must be able to see and hear into the words and actions that are taking place

before their eyes. T.W. Manson, a NT scholar in the mid-20th century, pointed out that “The blessedness consists not in the fact that their eyes are open, but that there is something to be seen by the open-eyed, the manifestation, namely, of the kingdom of God.”

- The Hebrews awareness of God’s presence was not in theological statements or in wisdom sayings. They saw “into” what was happening before their eyes. Commenting on the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea Rabbi Eliezer (in the first century) said: *How does one know that at the Red Sea even the maidservants saw what Isaiah and Ezekiel never were fortunate enough to see? Because Scripture says about them, ‘And through the prophets I gave parables.’”* David Biven, a modern scholar of the life of Jesus in his own Jewish culture says that *“God did not reveal himself even to the prophets in the same mighty way that he did to the whole people, great and small, at the Red Sea. What did these humble servant girls see? They witnessed a great demonstration of God’s power, the dividing of the Red Sea. They saw God’s kingdom.”*
- A powerful example of Jesus’ declaration that God’s kingdom is present in his words and actions is in his reply to the disciples of John the Baptizer. John is no longer certain

that Jesus is the agent of God who is to come to establish John's vision of the kingdom. They ask: "*Are you the Coming One?*" Jesus' reply is simple: *Report to John what you have seen and heard.*"

- Jesus was aware that in his healings, bringing the dead to life, feeding the hungry, and his teaching people had the opportunity to see and hear the Kingdom of God in their midst.
- *But Jesus was aware, also, that just being present or listening to words is not enough. A person had to be open to God's presence, to let go of control of what he or she wanted to see or hear or already believed or knew. That is why he said that he spoke in parables so that they would hear, but not understand, and see and not comprehend. The self-righteous and self-assured will not see or hear what they, themselves, refuse to hear and see.*
- *Once again, Jesus points to the need for an attitude of listening and discernment; he knows that intimacy with God enables a person to see God and hear God in every-day life when they have first seen and heard God within their heart in prayer.*

How Did Jesus and His Disciples Embody the Kingdom of Heaven?

- It is essential to remember that Jesus was a devout Jew and was faithful to his religious tradition. His embodiment of the Kingdom of God was not an attempt to begin a new religion (a concept foreign to first century Jewish life). His passion was to demonstrate that through his life God was initiating a renewal and reorientation of his Jewish world. He saw that radical changes in the lives of people, their leaders, and their society would bring God's Kingdom, that was already near, into manifestation.
- Jesus' embodied the Kingdom through an experiential and dynamic "movement" that was outside the norms of first century family relationships and responsibilities and was not sanctioned by the religious institutions and authorities of his day.
 - He did not depend on normal family resources and support
 - He had to justify the authority of his actions and teachings
 - He demanded a personal decision to become involved in his transformative movement
 - He had to manifest God's Kingdom in the midst of constant doubts, clashes

- and discussion regarding the validity of his words and actions
- His itinerant movement and the numbers of disciples and other temporary followers posed challenges when visiting homes and villages because normal family and village life was disrupted
 - The implementation of Jesus' movement was neither convenient nor conventional; the inclusion of women was scandalous and problematic.
 - The movement included access to and relationships with persons who were considered unclean, sinners, and marginalized by conventional society; the movement crossed many boundaries
 - There was an urgency regarding time and place that kept Jesus moving from place to place on foot
 - Jesus was clear that his role in the manifestation of the Kingdom is unique and at the same time to be shared with his most intimate disciples. He authorizes and sends them to teach, heal, and cast out demons. He exhorts them to share the same intimacy with God that he experienced, as embodied in the "Lord's Prayer."
 - The movement is held together because of each disciple's relationship with Jesus; the

disciples are a mixed group and share a life together, but is not sustained by the authority or power of the group; the movement is rooted and grounded in Jesus and his intimacy with God. The movement is God's doing and does not have a life apart from God. The disciples do not create the Kingdom; they are called to enter the Kingdom. (This is why the disciples "fell apart" and left Jesus alone at the cross and after his death).

- Jesus was the central figure in his movement and yet he balanced time with the group with his silence and solitude. Although he was "in charge" from the disciple's point of view, his person and power were not his own; they were manifestations of the one who sent him.
- People are attracted to the person of Jesus because they discern the possibility for a change in their lives. Something happens to them when they are with him and they are changed by his words and actions. The normal barriers within society disappear around him, especially for the sick, the poor, women, and children. They recognized and sought the power manifested in his life. Most of what we know about Jesus comes from the memories and reactions of the people attracted to him.

- In the midst of people's desire for Jesus, his primary concern was for them to be led not to him, but to God. The movement of Jesus had one primary purpose: to enable people to experience God's love and power. This experience restored their integrity and transformed their lives, but did not eliminate the powers, diseases, and dysfunctions of society that enslaved them. Jesus' movement was intent on removing all things, attitudes, desires, and relationships that prevented the imminent arrival of God's Kingdom. Jesus wanted his movement to be the instrument for the regeneration of his Jewish world and the restoration of relationships between people that would make the Kingdom a reality. This is why he emphasized , honoring God's place in people's lives, the desires of God for human life, dependence on God, forgiveness, and seeking God's help to avoid evil. (The heart of the "Lord's Prayer."
- Jesus' movement was one of many movements in his day. The primary purpose of Jesus' movement was to promote peace and well-being and, with God's power to make them possible.
- The Jesus' movement always included sharing food and meals with a variety of people. Many of Jesus' parables describing the Kingdom are set in the context of meals

and banquets. Jesus' willingness to share food with unacceptable persons was the source of significant criticism and at the same time was a sign of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom.

- The image of a banquet was not only a present sign of the presence of God's Kingdom, it was also used by Jesus as an image of a future banquet that would include persons from every nation and era of human history.
- **The heart of Jesus' teaching and actions about God's Kingdom was centered in the present.** "The Kingdom is very near." Jesus sensed that God's activity in people's lives during his lifetime and, in fact, through his life, was a sign that the Kingdom was a present reality and not only a future hope. The best understanding of how Jesus understood the Kingdom as a present reality may be seen in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Plain and summarized in the "Lord's Prayer."

The Sermon on the Mount:

Jesus teaches that becoming his disciple will mean more than rearranging a few details in a person's spiritual life!

- What is prayer? (Matthew 6:5-8)
 - a. It is an attitude in our relationship with God (5-6)
 - b. The heart of prayer is an authentic relationship with God that fills life with meaning. Prayer links our attitude about life with God's attitude and desires for life. (7-8) Our experience of God in prayer flows into our lives as love of God and our neighbor.
- Prayer is directly related to and embodied in our actions in daily life. It begins in the heart and flows from there into our actions. The motivation for prayer determines its authenticity. (Matthew 6:7-24)
 - a. Jesus mirrors the teachings of the Hebrew prophets: (1 Sa. 15:22-23 words directed to King Samuel), (Isaiah 1:10-14 God's frustration with empty prayer and liturgies), (Jeremiah 7:21-24 worship without commitment to God is worthless) , (Hosea 6:6 God desires genuine love and experience of God, not empty offerings), (Micah 6:6-8) prayer and action must be congruent and

aligns our desires with God's desires.

Prayer is a call to action.

- b. Jesus "went out to the mountain to pray "and he prayed to God all night." At daybreak he gathers his disciples and chooses twelve; then he takes the twelve down the mountain
- c. The people came to him to "hear" him and be healed; "The whole crowd wanted to touch him because power was going out of him and he was healing everyone."

THEN he teaches about what life is like in the "kingdom of God."

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people. It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them...I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 23)

In the Beatitudes Jesus outlines **the characteristics of faithful shepherds in the realm of God**. He begins each description with "Blessed are..." In Hebrew culture a "blessing" is the sharing of power (the life force) from one soul to another. That blessing can make each soul prosper as it fulfills its purpose in the world God has made. The soul of each person will only experience peace

(fulfill its purpose) when it is in harmony with all other souls who are committed to the same covenant. The power that makes this possible, the *"berakha"* (blessing), acts within the soul yet cannot be separated from its outward manifestation in the life of a person. One who is blessed will radiate the power of that blessing. Blessing, then, is the source of righteousness, justice, and peace. Happiness is living in the fruits of blessing. *"Surely it is well with the righteous; they eat the fruits of their doing."* (Isaiah 3:10)

It is with this deeply rooted Hebrew awareness of blessing that Jesus exhorts his disciples to be *"pure in spirit" (humble), ... "meek"* (not self-serving), ...to *"hunger and thirst for righteousness"* (work tirelessly for the common good), ...be *"merciful"* (have patience and solidarity with others),... seek *"purity of heart"* (single-minded openness to God and others),... become *"peacemakers"* (persons who share a blessing), ...and trust in the ability to withstand persecution and marginalization for the sake of God's kingdom.

All this is framed by the HONOR/SHAME foundation of Jesus' society. To be blessed is to be held honorable in the sight of God. These characteristics may be called *"prayer-in-action"*. They make the inner life of the soul tangible in daily life. They were the fruits of Jesus' prayer.

- Jesus' world view had three parts:

- ❖ The present “biblical age” that ended with John the Baptist
 - ❖ The realization of the kingdom of heaven (God)
 - ❖ The Last Judgment (with the Son of Man as Judge, followed by resurrection, the beginning of the age to come and eternal life.
- Jesus had a new and creative interpretation of God’s desires for God’s realm. This seems to have been a direct result of HIS LIFE OF PRAYER AND CONTEMPLATIVE LISTENING TO HIS ABBA. Modern scholars to not give this dimension of Jesus’ life the credit it deserves. It is ESSENTIAL to discover the source of Jesus’ innovative understanding of his role in the inauguration of God’s Kingdom and the nature of the Kingdom, itself.
 - The evangelists narrate a clear pattern of Jesus going off to a variety of “deserts” throughout his three-year mission. His time in the desert after his baptism was just the beginning of a constant discipline of intimacy and listening to God. This time WAS THE SOURCE OF HIS POWER, WISDOM, AND COURAGE AS A SEER, SAGE, AND GUIDE FOR DISCIPLES. Jesus’ quiet listening and faithful discernment was the source of his deep inner understanding of the realm

of God that he shared with his disciples and embodied in his activities.

- Jesus was convinced that the wisdom and understanding of the mysteries of God, God's kingdom, and God's involvement in history WAS NOT THE EXCLUSIVE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF THE WELL-EDUCATED AND POWERFUL WHO CAN AFFORD EDUCATION AND HAVE TIME TO LEISURE TO STUDY AND PONDER. Jesus, through his teaching to crowds and the inner group of his disciples, demonstrated that God's wisdom is not the exclusive domain of the upper classes and religious leaders of his day. His teaching methods show that this wisdom SHOULD BE MEDIATED AND MADE AVAILABLE TO THE POOR, UNEDUCATED, AND ORDINARY PEOPLE through the ordinary and every-day circumstances of their lives in families and village life. (Matthew 11:25 ff and Luke 10:21)