

The Kingdom of God

Given by John Turner 6/12/05 – Wildflower Church

“The Kingdom of God” and its companion, “The Kingdom of Heaven” are phrases that have nagged at me for some time. At the same time, these phrases play an important role in current Christian thinking, both conservative and mainstream. What do these phrases actually mean and what sense can we, as UUs, make of them?

Right up front, I have to say that I’ve got a major problem with the whole notion of “kingdom”. Further, I find it very curious that so many Americans – and conservative Americans at that – would go for this notion. Now many of you know that my wife Carol is English. She and I have had numerous discussions over what we refer to as “the recent unpleasantness” and what is generally listed in the history books as the American Revolutionary War. You may recall that this was a war that was fought over the underlying authority for governments. On the one side, there was Britain, with its King George (no relation to the current king George, I’m sure). Even with the Magna Carta putting some constraints on the monarchy, the ultimate power of the government came from the King who, presumably, got the power directly from God. (The parallels are kinda eerie, aren’t they?)

On the other side were the Americans. They had this idea of the government deriving its authority from the just consent of the governed. Each and every person (OK, white, property-owning male) was endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Note that there is no mention of the intervening King as in Britain. Each ordinary person got these rights from God and then we got together to decide how to govern ourselves.

So how do so many Americans ascribe to the Kingdom of God? We don’t stand for the kingdom of anything else. Most Americans

notion of “the King” stops at Elvis. And I don’t think that Elvis as King is anything like the King in the kingdom of God.

When I hear the Kingdom of God, I think more about the British notion of King. This is someone who rules. Someone who rules absolutely. You must obey and if you don’t then you have no recourse. “Off with their heads!”

I don’t think this notion is too far fetched. Many of the same people who believe in the kingdom of God would also go along with the notion of a God who must be obeyed.

“Trust and obey. For there’s no other way. To be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey.”

Now, I know that there are many in the current government who would like everyone to sing this song, but substituting another name for Jesus. “I’m from the federal government and I’m here to help.” Does this sit very well with most Americans?

Most of us are OK with obeying rules so long as (1) the rules make some sort of sense and (2) we had some input into making the rules and can get them changed if we want to. But that’s not the kind of obedience we’re talking about here. A lot of the rules don’t make any sense. (And I’m not just talking about the rules of kosher from the Torah.) And we certainly didn’t have any input into making these rules and you should just forget about getting them changed!

If you think about some of the old movies about kings and knights and such, you’ll remember that the king’s representative would ride into town and post a new law. You have to give the king a certain percent of your crop as a tax. Don’t think that this rule had to get a majority vote in the Senate or anything. The king just thought it up and here it is. Now if you don’t like it, no problem.

The king will simply kill you and take all your land and call it even.

Not only is this not a very nice model for religion, but it is very un-American. So why do so many Americans subscribe to a religion that works basically this way? God made up some rules. You have to follow them or go to hell. No ifs ands or buts.

What would Thomas Jefferson do?

Let me also note that this “kingly” model for God is not something from history. If you go a long ways back, to when the Hebrews were sorting out what their God was like, you’ll find that the covenant model was the common one. You may remember that God has made covenants with the Hebrews. A covenant is basically a two-way agreement. “If you do this, I’ll do this.”

This is pretty much in keeping with the notion of God that was common at the time. The idea of God was someone who could protect you from things like storms and droughts and, maybe other gods. You got your god to help you by making sacrifices. This also increased the power of your god. In return, your god would protect you because this helped him retain his power. So it was a two-way street. Largely absent from this arrangement was the idea of punishment because you didn’t hold up your end of the bargain. All your god had to do was stop protecting you because you stopped supporting him. Then you were on your own.

This doesn’t sound much like the King model of arbitrary, one-way rules and associated punishments for disobedience.

The New Testament has 75 references to the Kingdom of God and many more to the Kingdom of Heaven. If you are familiar with the Gospels, you will not be surprised that there are several repeats,

but, still, there are quite a few references to this idea. In current Christianity, the concept of the Kingdom of God is largely based on these New Testament references. Most of the NT references are by Jesus and those that aren't directly by Jesus refer to ideas of Jesus.

So what might Jesus have meant when he used the term Kingdom of God? What was the original message and not the one that has been distorted thru the ages?

I really think that the term Kingdom of God meant several different things in different contexts. We cannot ignore the political situation at the time of Jesus. The Romans were occupying Israel. As even Donald Rumsfeld says, "When one country occupies another, people don't like it." There was a strong political movement in Jesus' time to get rid of the Romans. This could lead to a theocracy in Israel – the Kingdom of God. (These parallels are really getting to me.)

So, to some people at the time, the Kingdom of God referred to an earthly government that was based on Judaism.

Then again, there are some references that seem aimed at the notion of an afterlife. Something like "when we all get to heaven ...". If the notion is that of heaven, then I have to say that I have no clue why it is referred to as a kingdom. What is the point of a king if you've already selected only the good people? What is there to ruling if you've picked only the people who were already following the rules?

There are two references to the Kingdom of God that hold the key for me.

"It is easier for a camel to pass thru the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of god."

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of god.”

Continuing in my theme of how all this relates to current events, it is really hard to reconcile the one about the camel passing through the eye of a needle with the tax policies of the current administration. Are they really trying to keep more people out of the kingdom of god?

At the same time, what kind of kingdom is it that says that being wealthy is a bad thing? I’ve been finance officer at two churches and I will definitely tell you that this is NOT a UU principle.

Some Christians will say that this first verse is a call to help those less fortunate than ourselves. But this reads something into this verse that isn’t there. It doesn’t say that the rich man got rich by failing to help the poor. It is a blanket statement about the rich. However you feel about Bill Gates, you have to admit that he is a rich man who has helped the poor. He has given billions for projects like eliminating malaria. At the same time, he is still rich and still fits the criterion of this verse.

On the other hand, the second verse says that the kingdom of god belongs to the poor in spirit. Note that this does NOT say, the poor in money. So you can’t simply say that rich is bad and poor is good. No, this verse is specific about the poor in spirit.

This is quite a curious combination here. Simply being rich makes it very hard to enter the kingdom of god. (By the way, it doesn’t say that it is technically impossible. Just VERY difficult.) And, for the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of god.

I think if you want to make sense of this, you have to look at the larger context of Jesus’ message. Personally, I think that a reading of the Gospels, along with some reflection (and some illuminating

sermons like this, probably) leads to the following: Jesus came from the Jewish tradition. He rebelled against the religion of his time that was highly technical and based on following certain rules.

He was asked to summarize his beliefs in a mission statement. “Love your neighbor as yourself”, he said. This is a fundamental revolution in religious thought. Up to then, religion was based on a covenant between God and each person. “If you follow the rules, then all will be well.” The rules did not say very much about how you treat each other, with the exception of murder and something called coveting.

Jesus has turned this on its head. How you treat each other is now the entire key. Set aside all these rules about kosher and sacrifice and such. The entire focus is on how we treat each other. What’s more, it doesn’t say to just treat other well. It says to love your neighbor as yourself. To me, this implies that we should consider all people to be equivalent and deserving of equal respect.

Sounds a bit like the inherent worth and dignity of every person, doesn’t it?

I know that there are UUs who cringe (or walk out) at the mention of Jesus in a service. I think this is a big loss because I view Jesus as the original UU. I would argue that what Jesus proposed was a fundamental shift in the focus of religion. Religion is no longer something between me and my God. Rather it is something between me and all my fellow humans.

If you look at it this way, then the two sayings I quoted earlier fit in perfectly. “It is easier for a camel to pass thru the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of god.” If we should be focused on the commonality of the human experience, then this is going to be extremely difficult for the rich man.

You may remember the stories during the 1992 presidential campaign where George Bush I was so fascinated by the grocery store scanners. When, if ever, in his life had he shopped for groceries? When had he watched the numbers total up and worry if he had enough in his wallet to cover it? When did he fear for losing his job and not being able to support his family?

How could someone like this really understand what it is like for most of us? Exactly how much sympathy could he have for the “common man”?

So it isn't a matter of how much money you have given to charities. It is a matter of common experience – of being able to say in all truthfulness, “I know how you feel.” This is why it is so difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of god.

At the same time, the poor in spirit know exactly what we're talking about. I have heard it said that the poor give a much higher percentage of their income to charities than do the rich. I think this is probably because they truly know what it is to be needy.

Sharing this common experience means that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.

I have kinda skipped over a part. That's the kingdom part. I think any interpretation of kingdom has to involve ruling in some way or another. So how does the notion of ruling come into this?

It's actually quite simple. The notion is that what rules all of our behavior is the concept of the oneness of all mankind. The inherent worth and dignity of all people. We do not run our lives worrying that god is going to strike us down or send us to hell (where, like me, I expect to find more of my friends). What rules our lives is

the simple rule of considering all people to be worthwhile and acting accordingly.

Wow!

It would be easy for me to leave it right here. We would all feel good. When we look around the room, we generally respect the inherent worth and dignity of everyone here. How much better does it get than the atheists can get along with the agnostics?

Sorry folks. That's not enough. Not by a long shot. It's a lot tougher than that. The kingdom of god doesn't include just all UUs. It's not just people who are pretty much like us. It also includes people who are quite different from us. It includes people who don't even much like us.

The kingdom of God is based on the common experience of all people. Not just people who look like us and think like us.

One of our ministers back in MD often says that the hardest part of being a UU is that you have to accept whoever walks in the door. This is true. We accept people not because they agree with us, but simply because they are who they are. This is no small challenge.

But it's actually harder than this. In addition to the people who walk through the door, we have to feel the same way about those who do NOT walk thru the door. We have to accept our common basis with those who not only would not walk thru our door, but who might want to nail our door shut.

I don't have any quick hints on how to achieve this. I DO work at seeing the commonality. I think I've achieved some appreciation for the way that what is a rather foreign religion to me can be very helpful to others.

Instead, let me consider the results of achieving this Kingdom of God. A world where we all see each other as equals. It certainly would be difficult to have wars. How could you convince your soldiers to kill the other soldiers if they were all equals?

What would happen to poverty? How could we continue to consume such a large share of the world's resources at the expense of our "equals" in other countries?

Certainly this Kingdom of God sounds like something worth striving for.