

THE PRESENT KINGDOM

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:1-10

And seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, and theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Do we have to wait for the kingdom of God? Must we wait all our lives in hope, without any realization of that hope? "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick," said the wise man of Proverbs. If the kingdom of God is all in the future; if all we can do is to wait for it as the ancient Pharisees thought, then most of us are going to lose interest in it and turn to more practical affairs before we reach our allotted three score and ten.

We have stressed several times in this series of sermons the fact that the kingdom has many facets or modes; that what oftentimes seem to be contradictions in the many statements about the kingdom are only statements about different aspects of the same things. In this sermon we are discussing the present kingdom. In the next sermon we shall discuss the future kingdom. There is no contradiction in those seemingly contradictory terms. The kingdom is both present and future. Some aspects of it exist now; for some aspects we shall have to await the future.

How do we know that the kingdom is present -- that it is contemporary with us today? John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ, came preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Not "will be at hand some day," but "IS is hand, immediately, now." The king is here, and will soon declare himself; the kingdom is available now, if you will receive it.

Jesus took up the same message. Matthew 4:17 reads: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." A short time later he commanded the apostles to preach the same message: "As ye go, preach, saying The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give." The presence of the kingdom was to be attested by certain signs which indicated the power and authority of God at work in the kingdom. On another occasion when the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out devils by the power of Beelzebub, Jesus declared, "If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then is the kingdom of God come unto you."

In nearly every instance when Jesus spoke of the kingdom, he spoke of it in the present tense, not the future. In the sermon on the mount, he placed some of his promises in the future; the mourners shall be comforted; the meek shall inherit the earth; those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled; the merciful shall obtain mercy. But in the two verses which mention the kingdom, he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is (present tense) the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Later in the same sermon when Jesus gave the disciples his model prayer, he taught them to pray "Thy kingdom come," (future) but also to pray "Thine is the kingdom," (present tense) not "Thine will be the kingdom when it comes."

Would Jesus have told us to seek something which was unattainable, which could be acquired only by waiting for the future which stretches interminably beyond our span of life? Reason tells us that Jesus would not bid us seek for something completely unattainable, something which was to come only hundreds or thousands of years in the future, or something which we had to die to find. Yet he commanded us to "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." If we are obligated to seek the kingdom it must be available now, in this life, in this world, for those who seek, or Jesus was commanding us to do the impossible.

To the scribe who came asking Jesus which was the greatest commandment, and who answered his own question discreetly, Jesus said: "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:34) Does this mean that he was about to die and go to heaven, or that he was near to the kingdom on earth -- that one more step -- accepting the King -- would have put him inside here and now? This sincere and godly man did not have to wait for the future kingdom; he was not far from it; he could have had it even at the moment Jesus spoke.

In the 25th chapter of Matthew, there is a discussion of some of the future aspects of the kingdom. Jesus says "Then shall the kingdom be likened unto ten virgins," etc. This is the only parable of the kingdom which is placed in the future tense. In all others, Jesus said "The kingdom of heaven IS like unto ..." In this particular chapter Jesus is discussing the future and triumphant coming of the kingdom and the day of judgment. But even in this parable of the future kingdom, Jesus has the king saying to those on his right hand, "Come ye blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." A kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world is in existence now; it has always been, and always shall be. We may have to wait for some aspects of it, but other aspects of it we may have now, in the present tense, in this life, on this earth, if we will.

We have noted in a previous sermon that one translation of Luke 17:20, which in the King James version reads, "The kingdom of heaven is within (margin, 'among') you," is "The kingdom is available unto you."

Two passages from Paul's writing bear out the idea of a present kingdom, available now. In the first chapter of Colossians, verse 13, Paul gives thanks to God "Who hath delivered (present perfect tense) us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son...." In his letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 22, he says again, "Ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." "Ye are come," not "Ye will come," to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

In our discussion of the earthly versus the heavenly kingdom we noted in the 19th chapter of Luke the parable of the nobleman who left one kingdom behind in order to go to a distant kingdom to receive it also. Jesus left the kingdom on earth to go to a distant kingdom to receive it also. Jesus left the kingdom on earth to receive the heavenly kingdom, but we still owe allegiance to his kingdom on earth while we wait for his return.

As Latter Day Saints we believe that the kingdom of God is to be increased, strengthened, built up on earth; that it is to go forth upon the earth to all peoples; that the power and authority of this kingdom will be attested by the signs following the believer. We believe that when a righteous people on earth are serving Christ as King and keeping all of his kingdom's laws, then the kingdom of heaven shall come down to earth with Christ to join the kingdom of God on earth and that Christ shall then rule over the combined earthly and heavenly kingdoms until they are perfected and delivered up to the Father.

Jesus taught us to pray "Thy kingdom come," future tense; but he also taught us to pray, "Thine is the kingdom," present tense. We look for a future kingdom, but we are not blind to the need for giving allegiance to the King now, for undergoing those ordinances and that new birth which will naturalize us and make us citizens of his kingdom now, for living worthily and obediently and loyally in the present kingdom that we may be worthy of the perfected kingdom of the future.