

# Whose is the Kingdom?

What and whose is the Kingdom of God? Dinah Livingstone explores.

In this article I look briefly at some New Testament texts about the Kingdom of God – what is its nature? to whom does it belong or who belongs to it? when is it coming? who is the king? Then I consider two ‘translations’ of this theme. First, the translation of ‘the Kingdom of God’ into the idea of God as a supreme ruler *backing* and *legitimising* the authority of an earthly ruler, emperor or king. Second, I look at its possible translation into humanist, non-supernatural terms, with Jesus Christ as the mythical hero and figurehead of a transformed humanity in a kind society. I argue that this second translation is more faithful to the spirit of the original than the first translation into the ‘divine right’ of emperors and kings.

Jesus begins his ministry by announcing the Kingdom: ‘Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news from God and saying: “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the good news” (Mk 1: 14). He says the Kingdom belongs first to the poor: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God’ (Lk 6:20) and to those who are persecuted for the sake of justice (Mt 5:10). The Kingdom belongs to the little ones, (Mt 19:14); the humble (Mt 18:4). The Kingdom is very difficult for the rich to enter; it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom (Mt 19:23). Jesus went about healing the sick and telling parables of the Kingdom, which often had a surprising twist. John the Baptist in prison sent to Jesus asking if he was ‘the one who is to come’. Jesus replies: ‘Go and tell John what you have heard and seen: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear... the poor have the good news preached to them (Lk 7: 22). These are signs that the kingdom is ‘at hand’. In order to enter the kingdom we must be ‘born anew’: ‘Jesus answered him (Nicodemus): “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew” (Jn 3: 3: one of the few uses of the term ‘kingdom of God’ in John’s gospel). We speak of the vegetable and animal ‘kingdom’. Here it is as if humanity must evolve further into this divine kingdom – almost like becoming a new species, with Christ as the ‘first man’ in it, the

‘new Adam’. For there cannot be a kind society on Earth unless human beings become kinder, a ‘new humanity’.

The Kingdom will be a time of social joy *on Earth* (‘thy Kingdom come on Earth’: Lord’s prayer, Mt 6:10) and Jesus expected it to come shortly in its fullness. ‘There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom’ (Mt 16:28). Jesus’ preaching and healing were signs of the Kingdom, it was ‘at hand’: he inaugurated it. But it would be fulfilled in the future. At the Last Supper he says: ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you I will never eat it again until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.’ And: ‘From now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes’ (Lk 22:16-18). The future coming of God’s Kingdom on Earth is portrayed as a meal – a feast, a ‘messianic banquet’. Jesus says: ‘When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind’ (Lk 14: 13) and when someone exclaims: ‘Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God’, he replies with his parable of the Great Feast, in which the owner tells servant to go out into the streets and bring in all these disadvantaged people.

The kingdom belonging to ‘such as these’ is called the Kingdom of *God*. That is, the Kingdom belongs to God the Father. God is ‘Our Father’ and the doxology at the end of the Lord’s prayer says: ‘For thine is the Kingdom the power and the glory’. Jesus speaks of ‘my Father’s Kingdom’ (Mt 26: 29) but also claims the Kingdom as his own. He speaks of ‘my Kingdom’ (Lk 22:30: to his disciples and Jn 18:36: to Pilate). There is a tension here, not only between Father and Son, but in the Son himself, which is the basis for the later developed theology of the Trinity and of Christ as one person with two natures. The tension between Father and Son is illustrated in the difference between the angel Gabriel’s words to Mary announcing the forthcoming birth of her son: ‘Of his kingdom there will be no end’ (Lk 1:13: repeated later in the Nicene Creed with reference to Christ), and the Letter to the Corinthians in which Paul says:

‘Then comes the end when he [Christ] hands over the Kingdom to God the Father’ (1 Cor 15:24).

Of course, this is not what usually happens when a son inherits from a father; he usually *supersedes* him. In the ‘high’ christology of John’s gospel, from chapter 1 verse 1, Jesus is the Word who has been ‘with’ (or ‘about’) God from the beginning: he is God. So then the ‘Kingdom of God’ would belong both to the Father and to Jesus as God. But elsewhere when Jesus speaks of himself as the ‘Son of Man’ e.g. ‘the Son of Man coming in his kingdom’ (Mt 16:28), then the Kingdom has been *conferred* on him by the Father. At the Last Supper he says: ‘I confer a kingdom on you, just as my Father conferred one on me’ (Lk 22:30). In the great *kenosis* poem in Philippians (thought to be an early Christian – possibly baptismal – hymn *quoted* by Paul here (Ph 2:6), because Jesus was obedient to the point of death, therefore:

God highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth  
and every tongue confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord.

He is above all ‘thrones, dominations, principalities, powers’ (Col. 1:16). And just as the Kingdom is *conferred* on Jesus – he inherits it – so too ‘we are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ’ (Rom 8:17). ‘God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom (Jas 2:5). (And we may just note that when anyone inherits from a parent, it is usually from one who has died. In that case, while God the patriarchal Father was alive, the heirs would be under him, but when he was dead they would come into their inheritance.)

In a startling translation of the Christian epic, when the Roman Emperor Constantine claimed that the Christian God had granted him victory in battle in 313 (his troops had borne the Christian *Chi Rho* symbol on their shields), Christianity eventually became the official religion of the Empire and from then on for centuries emperors, popes and later European kings claimed the Christian God’s authority for their rule. They were his regent or vicar on Earth and they fought bitterly among themselves in their struggle for

‘divinely-sanctioned’ power. These imperial, papal and royal thrones belonged to the rich and powerful; this was Christendom. They appealed for their authority to God the Father as the supreme ruler, or if they thought of it as Christ’s kingdom, it was a glorified Christ with the stress on his divinity.

In England this ‘divine right of kings’, claimed by King Charles I, was challenged and he was executed in 1649. But I witnessed a twentieth century example of such a claim to divine authority during a ‘gap year’ in Franco’s Spain. It was on the feast of Our Lady of El Pilar, who had appeared on a pillar to the apostle St James when he was discouraged in his attempt to convert Spain. I attended a Mass in Guernica (which Franco had bombed), for which the authorities had sent in a priest, and civil guards to stand in the sanctuary. In his sermon the priest said, just as Our Lady had come and encouraged St James to save Spain, so too had Franco saved Spain. At the consecration the civil guards in the sanctuary presented arms.

Another possible translation of the Christian epic focuses on Christ’s humanity, (or as Blake would put it, ‘divine humanity’). It reads the epic as the story of Christ as the eponymous hero and figurehead of a new kinder humanity. In the story Christ is divine as well as human, but this translation sees all supernatural elements as fictional or symbolic, ‘poetic tales’. This new humanity – ‘in Christ’ – is one body all sharing the same bread. The Kingdom of God still has not come by divine intervention but it is a vision of a good society, which we humans must try to create for ourselves on Earth.

‘In Christ,’ not only means being kinder human individuals, but the body of Christ is seen as a kinder body politic – a society which is good news for the poor. Being kinder means the kingdom of God will be more democratic and egalitarian, a society where everyone counts, including, as Jesus put it, ‘the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind’. If we look at who are the ‘thrones, dominations, principalities, powers’ – *archai* and *exousiai* – today, what immediately spring to mind are the Market, Mammon, giant multinational corporations, the ‘1%’, who have so much power over our governments – even when they are elected – and our lives. The epic story of Christ as the representative of humanity being raised above all these massive forces can be

translated as the struggle for *humanity* (in every sense) to control and prevail over these powers, who are indeed somewhat like angels, that ‘post o’er land and ocean without rest’, often invisibly.

In this translation, as in the original gospel, the Kingdom of God is both now and not yet. We can see signs of the kingdom in the utopian elements in

our society – for example, the universal free national health service (today seriously threatened) and free public libraries (also in peril). The full realisation of the kingdom is something that may or may not happen. That is up to us. The first sure sign of the Kingdom is that it is good news for the poor. So the planned cap on housing benefit, which will see many families having to move out of London, even if they have lived here for decades and their children are at school – is not only bad news for these people, it is bad news for London. (The high rent for which the housing benefit is needed does not go to the unfortunate tenants but to the landlord.) London is a city whose poets have seen its visionary transformation into the kingdom, the New Jerusalem. And indeed even now London has some wonderful aspects to it that can be called signs of the kingdom. For example, the term ‘proper London’ is used to refer to a street or a primary school which includes all different kinds of people, who are treated with equal respect – the very opposite of a ‘gated community’. A city that excludes the poor not only makes them suffer, but also cannot show even the first sign of the kingdom and is in danger of damnation.

In his editorial introduction to the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* in 2005, ‘The Sense of Being Glared At’, Anthony Freeman speaks of the accusation of heresy being associated with a ‘paradigm shift’. He gives the example of St



Local people campaign to save their public library. London 2011.

Thomas Aquinas, ‘for centuries past the touchstone of Catholic orthodoxy’, who ‘in his lifetime came within a whisker of being condemned for heresy ... because the main thrust of his work was to reinterpret Christian doctrine into the then recently rediscovered philosophy of Aristotle.’ This shift from the current neoplatonist interpretation was regarded as a betrayal. Likewise, Freeman says, his own presentation of Christian teaching in ‘non-realist’ categories was deemed by the Church authorities as a betrayal rather than a good translation.

The Christ epic translated into non-supernatural terms remains a powerful force for human transformation – salvation. Both the translations described above can be called ‘paradigm shifts’ – a new way of thinking about the gospel in a new social context. However, I think it is obvious that the second translation into a humanist version is much closer to the spirit of the original gospel than is the former translation into the ‘divine right’ of rulers. The seeds of humanism are planted deep in the Christ epic, which can come to full flowering only when we value the supernatural elements in the story as ‘poetic tales’ and know we have to do it ourselves.

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Dinah Livingstone’s book *Poetic Tales: Logosofia Down to Earth* was published by Katabasis in 2010.