

Understanding the Kingdom of Heaven

by Malcolm Stephenson



There was a time that if someone had said to me, I would not be able to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat I would have been offended. Yet when I served in India, back in the 1990's it took a local to show me the difference. The size, the shape, the fur/wool were all the same; it was only by looking at the eyes.

That cultural experience taught me two things. It explained a lot about Matthew 25 where Jesus separates sheep from goats while reinforcing a persuasive discipleship trait; the challenge to look after the thirsty, hungry, the marginalised. Jesus extolls such action, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' [Matt 25:40]

Secondly, it forced me to comprehend the cultural and time relevance of much scripture; Jesus's teaching is trapped in a rural culture. Nevertheless, human habits persist – little of our traits differ today from then ... nationalism, racism, economic oppression, greed, violence, abuse of power with arrogant individualism.

Mostly the cultural anchorage of many Jesus stories clarifies rather than hides the 'kingdom' message.

Today's lenses on our world – with pressure of career, housing, schooling, lifestyle - places much of our discipleship into our little remaining energy! Today's world view focusses on power and individualism. Up front, I declare my Jesus as a counter-cultural radical who set out to bring a corrective note to his time's excesses, empire-building, status-seeking and religious exclusivism. Jesus's teachings, I assert, still place before us, a recovery from our affluent excesses, our war-making, our status-seeking, and our religious exclusivism.

So, for a moment picture your image of the Kingdom? Does it include crowns, gold, thrones, luxury? Or is it about community, equality, harmony, shalom.

Some years ago, I studied Donald Kraybill's, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* where the author developed the theme of Jesus's radical nature. Kraybill's thesis was religion, with today's lens of wealth, power, and authority, has made the Kingdom spatial / territorial.

However, Jesus focussed on the social interactive aspects of human life; His message stressed the need for genuine internal righteousness in contrast to hypocritical ritual.

The scriptural story of the Temptation of Jesus, while using the devil, like any allegory is illuminating. I am from a school of thought that considers the personification of evil, of focussing on a Satan, is generally nonsensical. In this story it is enlightening, as it mixes with the other metaphors of mountain [political], temple [religious] and bread [economic]. So, this story and then the behaviour and teachings of Jesus's ministry emphasizes his understanding of the Kingdom.

Jesus rejects sitting on a mountaintop yielding worldwide political power.

Instead he undertakes the humble servant role who washes the feet of his disciples

Jesus rejects the Jewish Temple, in participating in his day's Jewish piety. He rejects the power of the Sadducees and the Pharisees, the two religious parties of the day. Some say the Sadducees were the rich, upper class conservatives of the time while the Pharisees were the left-wing progressives of Judaism. Both however, focused on rules – they just used different sources as their authority to exert their power over others.

Jesus contrasted this piety with love, compassion, and activity with people rather than upholding and arguing about the purity rules and the Judaic law.

Jesus rejected the exercise of his own power for self serving reasons, of meeting his own needs. In addition, he refused to consider any such abilities to entice or lure the allegiance of followers.

He instead contrasted self-serving with living out a life of sacrificial love and compassionate activity for others.

During my Business Administration degree training, a complete semester was spent on the topic of power. Much focus was placed on Financial power, Expert power, Organisational [or Positional] power. The executive management and economic focus were all directed towards these skills reassuring us students we had to concentrate on these. While there was a mention of personal power coming from the style and manner one adopted in relationships, it was not an emphasis. Much self and leadership development training has moved to this arena of recent times.

Meanwhile we have had the example of Jesus for millennia where due to his vision and understanding of the peaceable kingdom, he has invited humble servanthood within community not aggressiveness nor individualism. His passion for this vision, is seen in his willingness to serve the sick on the sabbath despite that placing his life at risk.

Jesus did not avoid exercising power; he used it a great deal, but always offering an alternate model of power. His appeal to his followers then and it should be today, is his genuine authority, his authenticity in rejecting conventional symbols of status and power.

His power came from his noteworthy compassion and truthfulness always allowing individuals to make free choices. His power was grounded not in coercion but radical obedience to love.

May our understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven be coloured by that Nazarene model.

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