

The Mission of the Kingdom of God: Ultimate Source of Meaning, Value and Energy for Jesus

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Among peoples today, the phenomenon of faith takes many different forms. Beyond the different religious expressions of faith within the great world religions, there exists a variety of other forms and objects of faith. Terence Tilley¹ discusses these around his ‘working definition of faith’ as a relationship—‘the relationship between one and the irreducible energizing source of meaning and centre of value in one’s life’.² Metaphorically speaking, those dominant sources of meaning, value, and energy for their devotees are their ‘gods’. Among those that Tilley identifies are the following: the family, the nation, secular humanism (the good of humanity), truth, justice, money, success, pleasure, the body beautiful, power. He suggests that ‘discovering our gods’ involves asking such questions as these: For what do we live? What energises our life? What would we die for? Why would we die for that?³

This presentation, then, of the vocation and mission of Jesus for the kingdom, also asserts his utter and ultimate commitment to that cause. It may be seen as the starting point for practically everything that he did, everything that he said, and everything that he suffered.

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1. Terence Tilley, *Faith: What It Is and What It Isn't* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).
2. *Ibid.*, 26.
3. *Ibid.*, 36–7.

A. The Centrality of the Kingdom of God in the Life of Jesus

The word ‘kingdom’ has everything to do with power and authority.⁴ To speak of *the kingdom of God* is to speak of *God’s power, authority, reign and rule over the material universe and over everything and everyone, including the community of human beings*. The coming of the kingdom of God is the central theme and program taken up by Jesus, in which consistently, unflinchingly, indefatigably and courageously, he shows his unrelenting commitment to that cause.

Good News from God and Good News about God

From the day he emerged from obscurity and entered public life, Jesus went about proclaiming this good and joyful news from God and about God: At long last, the time for the fulfilment of God’s plan for the human race has arrived. At long last, God is about to step into this world and its history and reign as king, not only over Israel but over the entire world. At long last, God is going to intervene for the benefit of his chosen people, Israel, and through Israel, for the benefit of all people. In other words, as Bishop Tom Wright puts it: ‘God was now unveiling his age-old plan, bringing his sovereignty to bear on Israel and the world as he had always intended, bringing justice and mercy to Israel and the world’.⁵ In fact, Jesus was saying implicitly that the whole history of Israel had now reached its ‘great moment of climax’, the climax ‘through which justice and mercy would embrace not only Israel but the whole world’.⁶ That, in summary, is the good news that Jesus was bringing.⁷ (Cf. Mark 1:14-15; Matt 4:12-17; Luke 4:14-15, 43; 8:1).

Kingdom and Conversion

In his first recorded words Jesus asserts that not only has the time for the fulfilment of God’s plan arrived, but that this also requires in response a change, a turn-around, in the lives of people. We read in Mark, the first written gospel: ‘Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; *repent*, and believe in the good news”’ (Mark 1:14-15; cf. Matt 4:12-17).

But what did his call to repentance, to conversion, to what the gospel calls *metanoia*, mean? ‘It meant a change of mind and heart, a turning of the whole

4. Richard McBrien, ‘What Is “the Kingdom of God”?’ *Catholic Update* (2003): 1, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0980>, accessed 13 August 2015.

5. N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 37.

6. *Ibid.*, 35.

7. Jean-Marie Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), at 54, remarks: ‘The Gospel–Kingdom link is basic. The Gospel of God is nothing else, in fact, but the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt 24:14; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; Acts 8:12). In reality, the fulfilment of the eternal design of the Father becomes identified with the coming of this Kingdom, which is at the heart of every earthly work of Jesus (cf. Matt 12:28; Luke 17:20-21)’.

person to God and to his offer of forgiveness and mercy; it implied a willingness to live according to the divine will.⁸ For Jesus' immediate hearers this meant becoming a renewed people of God, a kingdom people,⁹ a people who would 'give up their agendas; and trust [Jesus] for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the kingdom, his kingdom-agenda'.¹⁰ He was telling them in particular 'to abandon their crazy dreams of nationalist revolution'¹¹ against the hated occupying Roman power.

B. Two Gospel Incidents Illustrating the Kingdom Role of Jesus

1. Luke 4:16-21 (cf. Isa 61:1-2; 58:6)

In Luke's gospel, in a powerful scene in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus develops his convictions about his own role as prophet and agent of the coming of God's rule. The passage that he reads and applies to his own mission is from Deutero-Isaiah (see Isa 61:1-2; 58:6), a prophecy about the liberation that the Messiah was expected to bring when he arrived on the scene. The details are in Luke 4:16-21:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'¹²

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

That last sentence is critical to an understanding of the mission of Jesus: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'.

2. Matthew 11:2-5 (cf. Isa 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1)

In Matt 11:2-5, Jesus sends a message to John the Baptist to reassure him that the things he has been doing are what the Messiah was expected to do:

8. Daniel Donovan, *The Church as Idea and Fact* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 11-12.

9. See Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, 43ff.

10. *Ibid.*, 44.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Isa 61:1-2; 58:6.

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.’

In both Luke and Matthew, then, Jesus is presented as an eschatological prophet, that is, as a prophet of the end time, and as the expected and longed-for Messiah. The coming Messiah was seen as God’s envoy, one who would restore justice and side with the poor and the weak against their oppressors.¹³ But it should be noted that ‘when Jesus came preaching a message of peace and a non-military basis for the kingdom of God, it surprised and even dismayed many of his followers ... It wasn’t until he triumphed over death itself ... that they realized the Messiah’s true identity’¹⁴ as the Prince of Peace. During the days of Jesus on earth, most people had been expecting the long-awaited Messiah to be a military leader like David.¹⁵

Jesus, however, never put into words a definition of the kingdom of God. He expressed his understanding of it in concrete ways—particularly through his relationships, including especially those expressed through his table fellowship with sinners and outcasts, his healings and his exorcisms. Most of all he disclosed what it meant to him in the parables, metaphors, similes, and images that he used in his teaching. Andrew Hamilton remarks: ‘He ... gives us different glimpses of what it might look like if we allowed God to rule our lives by following Jesus’.¹⁶ He adds: ‘The way we attend to the kingdom is by attending to Jesus’.¹⁷

C. A Theme Deeply Rooted in the History of Israel

To understand and appreciate more deeply and broadly what Jesus meant for those who first heard his words, ‘we have to think our ways back into ... the world of the Old Testament as it was perceived and lived by first-century Jews’.¹⁸

13. John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 69. He remarks, citing G. Beasley-Murray, that ‘there is hardly any doubt that the restoration of justice belonged primarily to his mission’ (ibid.).

14. Daniel Harrington, *Jesus: A Historical Portrait* (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 28.

15. Ibid., 27.

16. Andrew Hamilton, *A Friendly Guide to Jesus* (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt, 2010), 24.

17. Ibid.

18. Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, 34.

A Theme of Hope

This slogan (phrase, symbol, metaphor)—‘kingdom of God’—so characteristic of Jesus’ sense of his mission, was not something that he invented. It goes right back into the history of his people. It expresses their hopes that the Lord their God was ever-faithful and would never let his people down. No matter what trials and tribulations they would have to undergo, he would be with them, and would keep bestowing his blessings of freedom, peace, prosperity, and fullness of life.

The hope Jesus held out to his people was that through Jesus himself the rule of God was ‘being brought to bear in the present world’,¹⁹ and that Jesus personally ‘would be the means of Israel’s God returning to Zion’.²⁰ To really appreciate such hope one must keep in mind that theirs was a world in which ‘the Jews of Jesus’ day ... were living under foreign rule and had been for several centuries’.²¹

To express their confidence that the power of God would save them, they and their ancestors turned to past events as symbols of their hope. Thus the stories of creation in the book of Genesis became symbols of their expectation that one day God would recreate his people and their world. God would call into being ‘a new people, a renewed Israel, a returned-from-exile people of God’.²² His promise to give to Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan symbolised their hope that God would free them from foreign domination. The rescue of the people from the oppression and misery of slavery in Egypt and the protection and guidance they experienced during their wandering in the wilderness also symbolised their hope for the future. Surely their compassionate God would rescue them from all injustice, discrimination, oppression and poverty! Daniel Harrington has summarised their hope in these terms: ‘God will vindicate Israel (or the faithful within it) by destroying evil and evildoers, and by bringing about a new heaven and a new earth where goodness and justice will prevail.’²³ Their hope became crystallised in the conviction that one day God would firmly, finally and perfectly establish his reign for ever. In their enthronement psalms especially (93, 95–99; cf. 47, 136), Israel acknowledged God as a powerful yet merciful king, who is Lord both of Israel and of the entire world. Frank Moloney sums up the hope Jesus shared with his people when he writes:

19. *Ibid.*, 37.

20. *Ibid.*, 53.

21. *Ibid.*, 36.

22. *Ibid.*, 41. On pp. 40ff., Wright suggests that Jesus’ parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-20 and of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 illustrate how Jesus was saying that Jewish hopes and expectations were being fulfilled in his own work. The story of the sower is about Israel being sown again, and that of the son going off into a pagan country and then being welcomed back home is the story of Israel’s exile and restoration.

23. Harrington, *Jesus*, 23.

Above all, Jewish hope was based on the unshakeable belief that God would intervene at the end of time, destroying all evil and restoring the original glory and beauty of his creation, lost because of human sin and evil. In the end, God will reign over all. We need to keep this in mind when we read or hear the words ‘the Kingdom of God’.²⁴

Human Kingship and the Kingship of God

One particularly eloquent symbol of Israel’s hope for the coming reign of God came from its experience of human kings. Only gradually and rather reluctantly did Israel accept a human being as king. For, in Israel’s thinking, only Yahweh could be Israel’s king, and no human being could usurp his position. However, for the sake of greater social organisation of the twelve tribes, a human king was eventually chosen, but without any abandonment of the idea that Yahweh alone was ultimately the King of Israel. In this view, the earthly king was empowered by God and through coronation became ‘son of God’ (see Ps 2:7).²⁵ In this way of looking at the matter, David, Solomon, and all their successors, were regarded as the Lord’s representatives, deputies and delegates.

So the term ‘kingdom of God’ does not mean so much an area of land, a physical space or territory, but a situation, a state of affairs—God’s ruling and reigning over the people of God, ruling and reigning supreme, ruling and reigning as their Lord and King, ruling and reigning in power and might and mercy, and ruling especially in favour of poor people, the victims of society. ‘In Israel’s history the reference is primarily to God’s acting as king on behalf of God’s people, blessing them, granting them well-being, protecting them and conquering their enemies.’²⁶ It is, then:

a metaphor expressing God’s sovereignty over every aspect of Israel’s life. God’s saving acts in history, God’s creation and sustaining of the world, God’s lordship over the nations, God’s promise of ultimate salvation and peace—all of these are expressed in the metaphor of God’s reign.²⁷

Memories of David’s Kingship a Particular Biblical Basis for Hope

Israel’s experience of earthly rulers proved quite disappointing. Donald Senior suggests: ‘David and Solomon were flashes of brilliance in a long line of often mediocre and sometimes corrupt rulers’.²⁸ Even ‘Solomon’s wisdom was

24. Frank Moloney, *A Friendly Guide to the New Testament* (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt, 2010), 7.

25. Donald Senior, ‘Reign of God’, in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J. A. Komonchak et al. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 851–61, at 854.

26. Brian McDermott, *Word Become Flesh: Dimensions of Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 42.

27. Senior, ‘Reign of God’, 856.

28. *Ibid.*

tainted by his idolatries'.²⁹ The destruction of the Northern Kingdom, the Babylonian invasion of 587 BC, and the carrying away of its population to exile in Babylon put an end to the monarchy. The line of David was never re-established, but the memories of his kingship became the basis of an enthusiastic religious hope, a hope fanned into flame by the prophets, that once again the kingdom of God would be established on earth.

'The destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the Babylonian exile were viewed by the prophets as judgments against the sins of Israel.'³⁰ However, from being a message of woe that the exile was God's punishment for Israel's infidelity to the covenant, the message of the prophets became a promise of restoration. God's punishment would not last for ever. God's people could look forward to something better than the pain they were experiencing here and now. They could look forward to a new expression of the kingdom of God, a new creation, a new covenant,³¹ and a new people. This is the basic message of the prophets Isaiah (43:19), Jeremiah (31:31-34), and Ezekiel (36:24-28).

This new people of God will ultimately include the whole human race, as expressed in the famous pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem (Isa 2:1-5) and the prophecy of the conversion of Egypt and Assyria (Isa 19:16-25). 'Many', said Jesus, 'will come from east and west and sit down with the patriarchs in the kingdom of God'.³² 'All Israel can do is to hold onto this promise of God's final intervention with hope.'³³

A Kingdom Established by God

So 'what had not and could not be achieved by human effort would finally be accomplished by God's own intervention. This aspect of God's reign is elaborated in the apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament (e.g. the book of Daniel)'.³⁴ This time, then, the kingdom of God would not be a matter of human planning, contriving, and organisation, but would be entirely at the initiative of Yahweh, who would establish his rule not only over Israel but ultimately over all peoples everywhere. 'This eschatological kingdom of God, embodied in the reign of Israel expanding over all humankind, will be a kingdom that embraces all of humanity.'³⁵ Through Israel the nations will come to recognise Yahweh, the great king of all the earth. Israel will be a shining sign for the whole world (Isa 62:1ff.) and a source of blessings for all the nations on earth.³⁶ In brief, Israel

29. *Ibid.*, 854.

30. *Ibid.*, 855.

31. Cf. William Loewe, *The College Student's Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 46-7.

32. Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, 47-8.

33. Fuellenbach, *Kingdom of God*, 40.

34. *Ibid.*, 32.

35. *Ibid.*, 32-3.

36. *Ibid.*, 38.

will be the means through which the world will be saved.³⁷ Its active role in the fulfilment of God's plan is explicitly expressed as being the servant of God.³⁸

A Gift and a Task

But while the coming of God's reign is seen as God's activity, this does not exclude human cooperation. There is a widespread belief that one could hasten the coming of the Messiah through prayer and good works. So the coming kingdom of God is looked upon not merely as a gracious gift but also as a task.³⁹

The Use of This Theme by Jesus

As a devout Jew, Jesus shared the hopes and longings of his people. He drew on this rich theme of the kingdom as a way of understanding his own vocation and mission. Although the kingdom was a theme deeply embedded in Jewish history, it was not as prominent in Jewish thought at the time of Jesus as it had once been. Jesus, however, promoted it from a secondary to a primary and dominant theme. Of the more than one hundred and fifty times that the expression 'kingdom of God' occurs in the New Testament, almost two-thirds of these are in the gospels (including the equivalent term in Matthew, 'the kingdom of heaven', where the word 'heaven' is a euphemism for 'God').

D. The Two Phases of the Kingdom of God

1. The Present Phase

'The kingdom of God involves two great moments: fulfilment within history, and consummation at the end of history.'⁴⁰ Jesus emphasises to the people and their leaders that the kingdom of God is happening right there and then in his own words and deeds. He teaches that with him the promised kingdom has broken into this world already. In his own person, in his message to and friendship with the poor and marginalised people of Jewish society, and in his healing and liberating actions for all sorts of needy persons, Jesus was therefore saying in effect: 'Look, God has now stepped into this world, and has begun to reign as King forever'.⁴¹ So, when some Pharisees asked him just when the kingdom would arrive, he replied that it is already among you (Luke 17:21).

Jesus lives out the arrival of the kingdom in a particularly striking way in his table fellowship with outcasts. By dining with them he demonstrates God's

37. Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, 35.

38. Fuellenbach, *Kingdom of God*, 38.

39. *Ibid.*, 34.

40. G. E. Ladd, as quoted in *ibid.*, 82.

41. Senior, 'Reign of God', 857, notes an important dimension of Jesus' work of healing: 'The sick and disabled are not only physically cured but, equally important, are given access to the community (e.g. Mk 2:1-12)'. His deliberate association and friendship with persons ostracised from their community, and also with women (see e.g. Luke 8:1-3), who were typically treated by men as inferior and insignificant, also proclaim that the reign of God is both inclusive and an experience of being saved.

unconditional love for undeserving sinners.⁴² So with Jesus the kingdom of God is already present in the world in a real but incomplete way.

The expressions ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ capture the two phases of the coming of the kingdom. It is *already* happening in the person and ministry of Jesus as when he says: ‘But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you’ (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20); ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning’ (Luke 10:18); and ‘For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you’ (Luke 17:21).

2. *The Future and Final Phase*

The kingdom of God in its future and final phase concerns the end of the world as we know it. It is the last state of everything that God has created. It is a situation and state of affairs in which God’s being *Abba* (i.e., ever loving Father) will be the decisive factor. His fatherly love will permeate all reality, and all reality will respond to his love. The whole of creation will be transformed into what Scripture calls ‘the new heaven and the new earth’.⁴³

The experience of God’s loving and mighty reign will be an experience of a better world, a world of peace and joy and bliss, a world of mercy and justice, a world without hostility or catastrophe, a world where God’s will is done and sin and evil overcome. The prophet Isaiah (11:6-9) gives us a picture of paradise regained as a symbol of that ideal state of affairs that will ultimately prevail, when God draws near to human beings to reign over them in a final and decisive way:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The prophet Micah (4:3-4; cf. Isa 2:2-4) too sees the future state of the kingdom of God as a world of unity, togetherness, justice and peace in which human beings do not hurt, destroy, oppress or exploit one another, as they have done all through history, and as they continue to do still:

42. Fuellenbach, *Kingdom of God*, 4.

43. Cf. Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 6. He remarks, citing Wis 11:24-26: ‘But it is not only we humans that will participate in God’s life; it is the whole universe that God’s love wants to lead into the fullness of life, because God is a lover of life’ (7).

[God] will judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more, but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

So Jesus, in harmony with the prophets before him, proclaimed the kingdom as not only something in the present but also as something still to come. Its full and final realisation, when God will abolish all evil and rule over everyone and everything for ever, has *not yet* happened. It is still to take place in the future. In fact, it will come fully only at the end of time, the end of history. And so, on the one hand, Jesus exhorts his followers to pray: ‘Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come’ (Luke 11:2), and, on the other, to be ready and on the alert for its coming (Matt 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-40). In its final phase, then, when it will be fully realised and manifested, the reign of God ‘is a transcendent experience beyond space and time’.⁴⁴ It is beyond human planning and organising, and, as such, we can only let it be given to us and let God alone answer all our deepest aspirations and longings for a new, a better, and even a perfect world.⁴⁵

3. The Language of the Future and Final Phase

What is said about it is often given in the language of apocalyptic—the language of revelation, the language of eschatology. This is to say that the language used ‘presents in powerful symbol the religious person’s deepest conviction that God has destined this world for good and that, in spite of the most fearful indications to the contrary, good will finally triumph’.⁴⁶ Language about the kingdom to come uses the worldview and the imagery available at the time to speak of the ultimate triumph of God’s rule, and to say that just as God is the beginning of all things, God is also their end. The world, in its present form and state, will not last for ever. The future belongs to God⁴⁷ and to the action of God. In the light of this future, a future still to be fully revealed and fulfilled, we must shape the present, of both the individual and of society,⁴⁸ and live in the hope of that better world to come, God’s kind of world.

Marcus Borg has described the future kingdom of God as the realisation of God’s dream for creation: ‘In a broad sense the Bible as a whole is the story of the dream of God, beginning in Genesis with paradise and ending with paradise

44. Senior, ‘Reign of God’, 859.

45. Harrington, *Jesus*, 26–7, makes the valuable observation: ‘The Resurrection of Jesus is the most dramatic and significant anticipation of the fullness of God’s kingdom’.

46. James Mackey, *Jesus the Man and the Myth: A Contemporary Christology* (London: SCM, 1979), 126.

47. Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins Fount, 1978), 223.

48. *Ibid.*

restored in the great concluding vision of the Book of Revelation'.⁴⁹ A famous passage from the book of Revelation 21:1-5 paints a particularly appealing picture of the kingdom to come:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God, and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See I am making all things new.'

4. *The Kingdom Timetable*

Donald Senior has commented on the timetable for the arrival of the kingdom:

This confused timetable for the kingdom, seemingly both present and future, has baffled biblical scholars. No neat solution is likely to be found. Jesus seems to say both. The fullness of the kingdom, the complete expression of God's rule over Israel and the nations, awaits the future. But that does not mean that we are stranded in the kingdom's waiting room, victims of an uncertain future. Now is the time of decision. Now is the time when we either open our lives to a new age of grace or wall ourselves up to a life of egoism. This urgency pulsates through most of the preaching of Jesus. The kingdom may be future, but the choice is now. We can catch some of the restless drive of Jesus' mission in the way he calls his disciples. He strides into their lives and summons them: Come—now!⁵⁰

For Jesus, the coming of the kingdom is particularly an experience of joy, as Gerald O'Collins has emphasised:

By proclaiming the kingdom Jesus has introduced the joyful time of salvation, a kind of marriage feast at which he himself is the bridegroom. In his presence, sorrow, mourning and fasting are simply out of place (Mark 2:18-20). The happiness of discovering the kingdom, he assures his hearers, turns life around and makes everything else seem unimportant. His parables of the treasure in the

49. Quoted in Fuellenbach, *Church*, 8.

50. Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (New York: Paulist, 1992), 75–6.

field and pearl of great price highlight the ecstatic joy experienced by those who come across such a once-in-a-lifetime ‘godsend’ (Matthew 13:44-46). The parables match the sheer delight of Levi, other tax collectors, and various public sinners when Jesus shares meals with them, forgives their sins, and calls them to become his disciples (Mark 2:13-17).⁵¹

E. Conclusion

This presentation has been about the meaning and purpose of the mission of Jesus the Christ on earth, summed up as *God sending him to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God on earth and make it happen*. In exploring this mission and vocation of Jesus, we have inferred from the quantity and quality of his ministry his absolute and unrelenting commitment to it. It was the guiding star of his life, his ultimate vision of reality, the cause for which he both lived and died. It was his favourite phrase for what his mission was all about. His sayings, his parables, his cures, his relationships, especially his practice of table fellowship, were all related to his purpose and program of bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. So much so that Jesus without the kingdom of God would be an incomplete Jesus, and not what he is for his followers—their way, truth and life (John 14:6).⁵²

The vision of the kingdom that Jesus had, a vision for which he lived, suffered and died, is of immense relevance to his followers sharing his faith-vision and faith-commitment. In fact, it has everything to do with the ultimate meaning of life for every human being, with the fulfilment of the deepest aspirations of the human heart, and with the plan of God for the whole of creation. It has much to do also with the wise saying of St Augustine that came out of his early turbulent life-experience: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you’.⁵³ It has much to do with the fulfilment of one of the deepest of human hopes and longings that evil will be overcome and everything will be all right. In fact, ‘the coming kingdom means the end of all evil’.⁵⁴ It means that ‘this sin-permeated and corrupted world—a world in which there is so much hatred, egoism, oppression and hopelessness’ will be transformed into ‘the New Heaven and the New Earth’.⁵⁵

‘Belief in Jesus’ message of the coming of the kingdom is ultimately belief in the overpowering victory of God’s love.’⁵⁶ In harmony with this, the author of the Old Testament book of Wisdom says to God: ‘For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have

51. Gerald O’Collins, *Jesus: A Portrait* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 20–1.

52. Fuellenbach, *Church*, 6.

53. Augustine, *The Confessions of St Augustine*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), 1.

54. Fuellenbach, *Kingdom of God*, 89.

55. *Ibid.*, 201.

56. William Henn, *Church: The People of God* (London: Burns and Oates, 2004), 141.

made anything if you had hated it' (11:24). For many people, the deepest desire of their hearts is complete union with this God, the Source of all being. It is a union that includes communion with all members of God's family, with all fellow human beings, and with the material universe and nature as well. Aware of such human yearnings and longings, John Fuellenbach makes the striking observation:

To the vexing question that has haunted millions of people, Why did God create the universe and human beings?, there is a simple answer that could be phrased as follows: God, the Triune One, said: 'We enjoy life so much that we want to share it with other beings whom we will create for that purpose.' God created us with the sole purpose of bringing us to share God's own life; it is the whole universe that God's love wants to lead into the fullness of life, because God is a lover of life.⁵⁷

The kingdom of God, then, ultimately involves being in union and harmony with this God who is love, and with everyone and everything that this God of love has made. The result of such union, interconnectedness and harmony is what the Jewish people have called *shalom*. The word is often translated as 'peace', but it means much more than the absence of war. It includes freedom from such negative experiences as oppression, anxiety and fear. *Shalom* also includes a vision of a new society where everyone and everything is in a state of perfect wellbeing.⁵⁸

If this all sounds like utopia (called in the *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* an 'imagined perfect place or state of things'), it is a utopia of God's design, promise and doing. This is the kingdom vision and message that Jesus came to proclaim and to make happen, with all his mind, heart, soul and strength. In fact, 'it is the most grandiose vision that the world has ever known. It was for this vision that Jesus lived, laboured, suffered, and died'.⁵⁹ The realisation of this vision was his mission on earth, his whole purpose. It was to this mission that he also called his disciples, saying: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21). His mission has become our mission as well, the mission of his church,⁶⁰ a mission requiring our total energy and commitment.

From the teaching and behaviour of Jesus, Richard McBrien sums up his own sense of the meaning of the coming of the kingdom of God in striking words when he writes:

57. Fuellenbach, *Kingdom of God*, 201.

58. Cf. Fuellenbach, *Church*, 9.

59. Fuellenbach, *Kingdom of God*, 25.

60. See Brian Gleeson, 'The Origin of the Church in Jesus Christ and His Mission', *Australasian Catholic Record* 81, no. 4 (October 2004): 431–41.

We can define the Kingdom of God as *the redemptive presence of God*. This redemptive (or saving) presence of God can be found in everyday personal experiences. Whenever people love one another, forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, work to build up a just and peaceful community—wherever people are of humble heart, open to their Creator and serving their neighbour—God's redemptive and liberating presence is being manifested. God's Kingdom and loving rule is in operation there.⁶¹

Additional insights into the meaning of the coming of the kingdom and how it comes about are just as striking:

When all is said and done, the Kingdom of God *is* God: God insofar as God is present to us and our world as a power that heals, that renews, that recreates, that gives life. To recognize that abiding presence of God in our midst and to work always to remove obstacles to its inbreaking are our fundamental missionary responsibilities. God's gift is our task.⁶²

The Kingdom of God is brought about by God and is God's gift. But it does not come about without human collaboration. It is proclaimed by the Church in word and sacrament. It is signified by the Church in its very life. And it is enabled to break into the world more fully through the various efforts of the Church on behalf of justice, peace and human reconciliation.⁶³

61. McBrien, 'What Is "the Kingdom of God"?' 1.

62. *Ibid.*, 5.

63. *Ibid.*