

## Hope and the Kingdom of God

St. Brandon's

Ezekiel 17:22-end; 2 Cor. 5: 6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

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"So whether we are at home or away", says St Paul ... it was very tempting to use this as a way into a sermon on football! You might just be aware that there's a football competition taking place in Russia at the moment, and I'm sure it wouldn't be out of place to include a prayer or two for the England team, and for supporters' frayed nerves, in our intercessions. For the next four weeks it's all about the football.

Or is it? Another reading of what's going on is that this is really a game within a game, the bigger game being one of geopolitics. Russia parading itself on the world stage. Nations using it as an opportunity to display their sporting ability as a means of staking a place in the league of nations. And, of course, that's by no means the only thing going on geopolitically at present. America and trade tariffs and a possible trade war, the summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, the future of NATO, Russia and the G7, and closer to home Parliament voting not to join the EEA after Brexit. Sorry – too many acronyms – apparently we'll not be joining the European Economic Area after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, and I'm sure you don't need me to tell you the significance of that ...!

And that's only the headlines from the last week or so! It all feels a little like a school playground and girls being friends and not with each other at a bewildering pace – except that this is mostly men and the toys they're playing with are serious. And it's easy to despair at it all.

So where is God in all of that (except, of course, on "our" side, whoever "we" happen to be)? How does God relate to the nations of the world, the kingdoms of this world? Well our OT reading says something about that. Using the imagery of a cedar tree, it speaks of God as breaking off a tender sprig from its topmost branches and then planting it on a lofty mountain height where it will grow into a noble tree. The picture relates to the Messiah from the house of David being planted on Mount Zion by Yahweh (the name for God in the OT), and protecting the fledgling nation of Israel as it returned from exile in Babylon, though, of course, we would also understand it as saying something about Christ. And the reference at the end to making high the low tree and drying up the green tree, and of the certainty of that happening, is saying that God is the master of history, intervening directly in the affairs of the nations. As Psalm 103:19 puts it, "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all". Or again, in Isaiah 2:4, God "shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore". This is what has been called the 'peaceable kingdom' in which "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" (Isaiah 11:9).

And our gospel reading today picks up this same idea of the Kingdom of God, and like our OT reading describes it in agricultural terms. Jesus' parables say something about the inevitability of growth once the seed is scattered, emphasising that the growth of the Kingdom is a work of God Himself, not a human achievement. And it also describes the way in which, from such insignificant beginnings, a harvest will come, either of grain or, in the case of the mustard seed (don't ask which variety), a shrub so large that birds can make nests in its shade – a picture of abundance and protection.

And, of course, this whole idea of the Kingdom of God is pretty central to Jesus' ministry. In the synoptic gospels, at least, (not so much in John's gospel) there are many references to the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. John the Baptist comes proclaiming "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 3:2), and Jesus then begins his ministry with similar words (Matt. 4:17, Luke 4: 43). Jesus then,

of course, teaches us to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, and the ending we've added by tradition acknowledges that "the *kingdom*, the power and the glory *are yours*". So twice in the Lord's prayer, as we say it, we pray about the Kingdom, asking for the Kingdom to come while also acknowledging the inevitability of its arrival.

Jesus also tells us not to worry about what we'll eat or wear, or indeed not to worry about anything at all, but instead to seek first the Kingdom of God (Luke 12:31). And, not something we notice much I think, Jesus goes on from there to say, "do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32), reminiscent perhaps of Jesus' words in the beatitudes that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5), or that the poor are blessed because theirs is the Kingdom of God (Luke 6:20). In contrast, Jesus also warns how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God (Luke 18:24), while also saying that the Kingdom of God belongs to little children (Luke 18:16). Yet Jesus also says that the coming of the Kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, but that "it is in your midst", or possibly "within you" (Luke 17:20-21). And Jesus says to Pilate at His trial that His Kingdom is "not of this world" (John 18:36) indicating that it is not in direct competition with the kingdoms and nations of this world, while yet also infusing them with Kingdom values and subverting them when they depart from the will of God.

So the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of heaven, is a big and important theme, used throughout the Bible and operating at the individual level ("within you" and the idea of us as individuals entering the Kingdom of God), at the level of the community (it is in "in your midst"), and also at national and international levels. But I want to suggest that it all comes down to one thing, with two implications.

The one thing is hope. I said earlier that it was easy to despair at the state of the world, at the strutting and positioning of the nations and of individual leaders on the world stage and, we might add, of all the rest of the pain and darkness in the world. But what the Kingdom of God says to us is that it will not always be this way. There is a maybe difficult to observe but nonetheless inevitable advance of the Kingdom. The Kingdom and the power and the glory are already God's, even if, in so many ways, we do not see that now. Therefore, there is hope.

Now hope has often been understood as one of the three theological virtues – faith, hope and love. I think we talk quite a lot about faith and about love, and perhaps rather less than we should about hope. And there are two sides to hope. One is that it is a virtue which is infused in us by God. In other words, it's something that God gives us and something that God enables in us. Understanding something of the Kingdom of God might help us with that, but ultimately our hope comes from God. As such it is a long way from optimism, a kind of 'always look on the bright side of life' attitude, which can easily become a running away from reality. A hope infused by God in us will always be entirely realistic about the darkness and pain in the world and in ourselves. But the other side of hope is, in a sense, a response to that. It is "a natural passion arising from a desire for something that is understood to be good, though it is not yet possessed [and, indeed, is] difficult, but not impossible, to attain".<sup>1</sup> That's a quote from a short book by Cardinal Vincent Nichols called *Hope in Action*. The point is that, stemming from the hope that God infuses in us, we will have hope not just in general but for specific, concrete things which we know are good, and long to see, while knowing that they're not easy to attain. A denuclearised world, nations that seek the common good, a world which cares for creation, a world in which the weak and vulnerable including children are protected and nurtured, a world in which no one goes to bed hungry, and so on.

Now I said that there were two implications of hope. One is pretty obvious – that since there is hope in God, since God's Kingdom will come, we should not be people who despair, but we should always be

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<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Vincent Nichols, *Hope in Action. Reaching out to a world in need*, SPCK, 2017, p.4.

people of hope – not optimism, hope. And, secondly, as the title of Vincent Nichols' book says, this then needs to be a hope that we put into action to enable the Kingdom for which pray to come.

There used to be a Kingdom season in the Church's year, which ran from All Saints Day on 1 November for four weeks up to Advent. We seem to have lost that, but one of the collects from that season says it all, so I would like to end with that. Let's pray.

O God, who set before us the great hope that your Kingdom shall come on earth and taught us to pray for its coming; give us grace to discern the signs of its dawning and to work for the perfect day when the whole world shall reflect your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.