

## The Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world.

### **Introduction**

The questions I would like to address in this article are: How does the Kingdom of God relate to the kingdoms of the world? How does the Kingdom of God relate to the Church? How are we to enter and live fully in the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, rather than succumb to the seductive fantasy of false kingdoms and empires which we see not only strewn around us in the ruins of history, but which are also very much part of the society today in which we live and move.

What and where is the Kingdom of God/Heaven in all this mix and how and why can we have such confidence in God's real and eternal kingdom?

I will also touch briefly on how Jesus and Paul related to the State imperial power of Rome and finally think about how God wants us to live in this world, using Jesus' great prayer of intercession in John 17 as our guide and inspiration.

[**Note:** The usual Biblical phrase in Matthew's gospel is the 'Kingdom of the Heavens' which is used 34 times as a Semitic substitute for the divine name. Everywhere else in the NT the phrase 'Kingdom of God' is used. I will use both phrases interchangeably.]

### **The Multiplicity of Kingdoms**

In earthly terms, there are quite a few kingdoms that we may belong to according to where we were born. For example, there are the kingdoms of Bahrain, Brunei, Qatar; there's the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan; and the kingdoms of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Swaziland etc. with their absolute monarchies.

And then there's the United Kingdom, which is neither united nor a kingdom – a misnomer if ever there was one! Yes, we have a constitutional monarch, but although our Queen reigns, she doesn't rule. She, for better or worse, must subject herself to our system of parliamentary democracy.

And with regard to unity, the Sunday Times banner headline on the 24<sup>th</sup> January this year read: 'Revealed – Our Disunited Kingdom.'

It was set against a torn and tattered Union Jack and the paper revealed that, in a poll it had conducted, the majority of Scottish and Irish Voters want referendums on the break-up of Britain.

Of course, all of these kingdoms (and the many other empires, civilisations etc. down through the centuries), impressive and vibrant with splendour and colour as they may once have been, or still are today, all come under the umbrella title of 'kingdoms of the world' - bogus kingdoms promised to Jesus by the devil, if only Jesus would bow down and worship him (Mt. 4:8&9).

Jesus refused the offer, but many it seems, even those who are ostensibly his disciples, have accepted ~ but at a price. It is so easy, like Demas, to fall in love with the world and desert the Lord and his people (2 Tim.4:10).

### **Honours, Empires, Anthems and Kingdoms**

I am always amused by those who are offered, here in the U.K., MBE's, CBE's and the like in our twice-yearly Honours' lists. If they accept the allurements, given for services to this, that, and the other, they are inevitably becoming members, commanders etc. of a British Empire that no longer exists!

And how many Honours, even Knighthoods, have had to be hastily and embarrassingly withdrawn after the recipients' misdemeanours subsequently came to light?

One immediately sees the wisdom of Jesus' recommendation that we do our good deeds privately and wait for his heavenly reward, rather than publicly, be praised by men in this life, and then look rather foolish! I have always thought, as Jesus indicated, that we can have our reward either in heaven or on earth, but not both. (Mt. 6:1-8)

We used to boast that the British Empire, so vast it covered a quarter of the globe, was one on which the sun never set. Nowadays, all we have left is the commonwealth of nations (all former territories of the British Empire), over which the Queen neither reigns nor rules, and on which the sun may be setting and, after the Queen's death, may even set for good.

Barbados is the latest commonwealth country to remove the Queen as Head of State from Nov. 30<sup>th</sup> this year. Last year they removed the statue of Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson from their Trafalgar Square (now renamed National Heroes Square) in their capital Bridgetown.



Perhaps only now are the people of that island really coming to terms with their colonial past and the influence of the slave trade. Certainly none of them were impressed with the 'Windrush' scandal, feeling that they had been well and truly abandoned by the 'Mother Country'; the last nail in the coffin perhaps.

Meanwhile, here in Britain, and encouraged by our Prime Minister, we continue to sing, gustily maybe, but also rather forlornly, 'God who made us mighty, make us mightier still'!

Of course, there have been many attempts to build various kingdoms here on earth based on different socio-political outlooks. There was Hitler's national socialism and the 'third Reich' – a kingdom which was supposed to last for 1000 years but only managed a dozen and which led to the deaths of tens of millions of people. At the other end of the political spectrum was the Communist party's policy of collectivism, responsible in the Ukraine alone for the deaths of between 7 and 10 million people in 1932-3 as the people starved.

These particular deaths in Ukraine were caused, not by a flood or a drought resulting in a famine or even by a virus causing a pandemic, but as the direct result of a deliberate policy instituted by Stalin in an attempt to build a utopian society – a Kingdom of Heaven – on earth.



At Christmas time, having received hundreds of Christmas cards over the years, my mind often goes back to one in particular that I remember most vividly.

On the front of this memorable card were pictures of various demagogues and dictators down through history – a few Caesars, Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, Chairman Mao, Idi Amin etc. - with the words written alongside, **“The world is full of men who would be gods ...”** and inside the card there was a picture of the baby Jesus, lying vulnerably and alone in a manger, with these words .... **“but only one God who would be man.”**

## **'Christendom'**

And what about 'Christendom' – the so-called 'kingdom of Christ' - founded by the Emperor Constantine after his own 'conversion' at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. I use the term 'Christendom' as a way of describing a socio-political entity founded upon and upholding Christian values.

Presumably it began as an attempt to align the decomposing Roman Empire with the Church, rather like Stalin sought to resurrect the Russian Orthodox Church when the German army was within a few miles of Leningrad and Moscow towards the end of WW2.

Marxist materialism alone, Stalin thought, was not going to be sufficient to sustain the Russian people in a time of acute crisis.

It's possible that Constantine's support for Christianity was purely a politically expedient move, though his Edict of Milan, issued with Lucinius in 313 A.D., brought some welcome benefits. It was made an offence to persecute Christians, their confiscated land and property were returned and civil rights were secured for them, together with other religious minorities.

This paved the way for the Council of Nicea and the formulation of the Nicene Creed in 325 A.D., (unfortunately Constantine forbade any Jews from attending), but it was not until the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 A.D. by Theodosius, that Christianity became the State Church of the Roman Empire.

But the amalgamation of Church and State (these two are always kept separate in the New Testament) has always proved to be a mixed blessing.

By the time of the Middle Ages in Europe, it was customary to divide populations into 3 groups: - laboratores (workers), bellatores (soldiers) and oratores (clergy).

And it was the clergy, who were in the minority numerically, who wielded most of the power through the Catholic Church. Kings, Queens and other Leaders derived any power they had from their alliances with, and the protection of, the Church, which acquired land, collected taxes, sponsored wars etc.

On Christmas Day 800 AD, Pope Leo III crowned the Frankish King, Charlemagne, 'Emperor of the Romans' at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Charlemagne then went on to spend most of his reign engaged in warfare seeking to convert his subjects to Christianity. But, according to Jesus, the sword is neither an acceptable nor an effective evangelistic tool.

Positively, however, it is possible to point to some of the benefits of 'Christendom' in terms of art, literature, architecture, justice, values etc. Though inevitably, because it was a human invention, it was always going to have a limited shelf life. Indeed, it is possible to say that Jesus himself abolished 'Christendom' before it began, when he declared that his Kingdom was 'not of this world'.

People vary as to when they believe 'Christendom' came to an end in Western Europe. Some say with the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, others think it smouldered on and didn't finally extinguish until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

'Christendom' was characterised by 5 'C's: Crusade – Coerce – Convert – Conform – Colonise. The impact of all this is still with us today together with many vestigial remains from that time e.g. the inscription on the canopy over the pulpit in St. Paul's Cathedral which reads "For God and For Empire."

By way of contrast to the demise of 'Christendom', we have the reassuring words of Jesus that he would build his Church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. 'Christendom' collapsed, Jesus' Church continues to grow and needs, in this day and age, to be characterised by these 5 'C's: Connection – Contemplation – Critical thinking – Creativity – Compassionate action.

[See [www.tdburnette.medium.com](http://www.tdburnette.medium.com)]

But what about the established Church of England? Being the 'State Church', it remains closely aligned to the Government of the day ~ its Archbishops and Bishops being appointed by the Queen, in consultation with the Prime Minister, and the General Synod being unable to pass any major changes without the support of both Houses of Parliament.



It is land and property rich and cash poor, its hands are somewhat tied by bureaucracy, its voice muted by a loss of confidence, its efficiency hampered by its hierarchical structure, its moral authority weakened by its failure to deal adequately with institutional racism and child sexual abuse, its membership and clergy ageing and its clergy declining numerically. Meanwhile it seeks desperately to re-invent itself, successfully in some places, for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

[I write as a practising member of the C. of E. and would recommend Paul Bradbury's book: 'Home by another route – Reimagining today's church', Bible Reading Fellowship, 2019. Paul is a pioneer minister in the Church of England who leads a missional community based in Poole, Dorset.]

Some Christians have sought to establish the Kingdom of heaven on earth armed with their post millennial theology i.e. that Christ will only return after **we** have built his kingdom here. They tend to believe that things are getting better and will continue to improve before Christ comes again; personally, I think things will continue to deteriorate but then suddenly improve when the Lord returns.

The dilemma and disappointment we face with regard to all this is well summarised in this excerpt from Hugh Kingsmill's book, 'The Poisoned Crown' (1944): "What is divine in man is elusive and impalpable, and he is easily tempted to embody it in a concrete form – a church, a country, a social system, a leader – so that he may realise it with less effort and serve it with more profit. Yet..... the attempt to externalise the Kingdom of heaven in a temporal shape must end in disaster."

So where does all this leave us? How does Christ's completely new message about a new kingdom, the 'Kingdom of Heaven', relate to the spurious 'kingdoms of the world', and to the church itself? How may we enter the 'Kingdom of Heaven' on earth and live as salt and light in such an alien environment? On what is our confidence based as we pray, "Father, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"?

But before moving on to these questions, I would like to consider briefly how both Jesus and Paul related to the State imperial power of Rome.

### ***How did Jesus relate to the State Imperial power of Rome?***



It's worth remembering the trick question that the Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or not?" (Mk. 12:13-17).

Having called for a coin and asked them to identify whose image and what inscription was imprinted on the coin (Caesar's), Jesus then clearly distinguishes between what should be given to Caesar and what should be given to God. The two are separate and demand separate allegiances.

Presumably Jesus is expecting that the next question from his interrogators would be, "Whose image are we made in then?", but the question never came.

All of us, of course, are made in God's image and likeness, and are called to give ourselves wholeheartedly to him. This is a separate issue from paying taxes but one which the Pharisees and Herodians failed to raise.

On another occasion, when Jesus was being cross-examined by Pilate, he said to him, "My kingdom is not of this world... it is from another place" i.e. his kingdom had its origin in heaven, not on earth. (Jn. 18:36)

It is worth remembering that earthly kingdoms keep themselves in power mainly through force of arms and shows of military strength. Conversely, the Kingdom of Heaven can never be established, or needs to be protected, by violent means ~ a truth sadly forgotten throughout Church history.

### ***How did Paul relate to the State Imperial Power of Rome?***

Writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul made it clear that, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." (Rms. 13:1)

This is quite a command, bearing in mind two things: firstly, that Nero was the Emperor at the time, someone who makes our current world leaders seem positively benign and friendly by comparison! And secondly, it was the state authorities who, presumably, ordered Paul's own execution.

Jesus, of course, had made the same point about authority when he said to Pilate, "You would have no authority over me (i.e. to hand me over to be crucified), if it were not given to you from above." (Jn. 19:11)

So although we are called to submit to the Divinely appointed authorities, and to pray for them (1 Tim.2:1-4), we are never called to put them in God's place and worship them.

God and Caesar must always be kept separate and, in terms of worship, like God and Mammon, they are mutually exclusive.

Unfortunately, Julius Caesar had a statue of himself made with the inscription 'Deo Invicto' ('to the Unconquered God') and the Emperor Domitian used to sign documents 'Dominus et Deus' ('Lord and God').

I suppose the ultimate blasphemy would be for us to say, as did the chief priests in Jesus' day, "We have no king but Caesar." (Jn. 19:15)

### **The Reality of God's Kingdom on Earth**

Having cleared the ground, it's time now to turn from the darkness of the empty, temporary, artificial 'kingdoms of the world' into the light of the meaningful, glorious, permanent and real 'Kingdom of Heaven' on earth.

"For [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:13)

***Who can enter the Kingdom of Heaven on earth?*** Potentially, anyone can.

***On what terms?*** Only those who have been 'born again'; only those who have a childlike simplicity and curiosity; only those who confess and repent of their sins and only those who are willing to deny self, take up their cross and follow Jesus, can enter the Kingdom.

***Who may find it particularly difficult to enter the Kingdom?***

The worldly wise, the materially well off who are trusting in their own riches, and the self-righteous may all, according to Jesus, find themselves excluded.

***Where is the Kingdom?***

Primarily, the kingdom refers to the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God. The kingdom is not expressly connected with its subjects, but as people of God we enter the kingdom and live under the authority and government of the King.

***How is the Kingdom made visible?***

It manifests itself through signs and wonders, through the sacraments, through preaching (sowing 'the word of the kingdom' - Mt.13:19), worship, fellowship, teaching, prayer, prophecy, evangelism, mission and acts of kindness and mercy demonstrated to all.

The kingdom of God is not a matter of externals, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rms. 14:17).



### ***Is the Kingdom present or future?***

It is both. In Jesus' ministry the future kingdom of God was drawn into the present.

"If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you." (Lk. 11:20)

The kingdom of God has invaded history but without disrupting the present structure of society. As Christians today, we are still living in this 'present evil age' (Gal. 1:4) but have also been delivered from it. When Christ came, and in his ministry, the 'Age to Come' broke into the 'present evil age' so we are now living in what has been described as the 'overlap of the ages'.

It is because of this reality that the kingdom is not yet a pure kingdom (Mt. 13:24-50). The wheat and tares continue to grow alongside each other in the world; the kingdom of heaven is also likened to a drag-net which is currently scooping up good fish and bad. Only at the end of the age, when Jesus returns, will the wheat be separated from the tares and the good fish from the bad.

This is a task for the angels to perform, not you and me!



Yet through our ministry now, the kingdom continues to grow and permeate the whole of life throughout the world (the mustard seed and the leaven).

We are also acting as salt, which in Jesus' day had a dual function. It was used as a disinfectant to stop bad things spreading and as a fertiliser (potash) to help good things keep growing.

Salt also brings out the flavour of foodstuffs, so Paul wants our words to be seasoned with salt; salty speech rather than tasteless, insipid words! This is particularly important when we are witnessing to others and answering their questions (Col. 4:6). And by our visible good deeds on earth, we are also acting as lights shining in the darkness so that our Father is praised in heaven (Mt.5:13-16).

Moreover, as well as the present reality of the kingdom in the here and now, the kingdom will also come in the glorious future when the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. He will reign for ever (Rev. 11:15) and we will reign and serve with him (Rev 1:6 & 5:10). What a prospect!

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” (Hab. 2:14)

### ***Is the Church the same as the Kingdom?***

No it is not. The Church stands in relation to the Kingdom as a herald and foretaste. It is the Kingdom, not the church, which is the end of creation, and in the redeemed, renewed creation there is no temple (Rev.21:22).

We are called to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, not the gospel of the church (Mt. 24:14; Acts 1:3, 8:12, 19:8, 20:25, 28:23 & 31).

The church looks beyond itself to the Kingdom of God, like an eschatological sign erected in the world.

George Ladd summarises this as follows: - “While there is an inseparable relationship between the Kingdom and the church, they are not to be identified. The Kingdom is God’s reign and the realm in which the blessings of his reign are experienced; the church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God’s reign and entered into the enjoyment of its blessings.

The Kingdom creates the church, works through the church, and is proclaimed in the world by the church. There can be no Kingdom without a church – those who have acknowledged God’s rule – and there can be no church without God’s Kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the fellowship of men.”

[George E. Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, Lutterworth Press (1975)].

### ***Why should we have confidence in the reality and glory of God’s Kingdom, both now and in the future?***

**Because of: 1. The failure of all other human and worldly kingdoms, empires, civilisations and societies down through the ages.**

These have all, ultimately, been based on the pursuit of power, the subjection of others, sensual satisfaction, the accumulation of money and knowledge, the desire for success and the adulation of celebrity.

Shakespeare, in King Lear, speaks of “the rise and fall of great ones that ebb and flow with the moon.”

So, in one sense, we can take heart when we see all around us the decay of the institutions and instruments of power; money losing its value, morals declining, debt rising, dictators and members of parliaments arguing and not knowing which way to turn in the confusion and conflicts which beset them.

For it is then that Christ’s hand reaches out in the darkness, sure and firm, to all who will take it and says, “Come and join Father and me in our Kingdom work!”

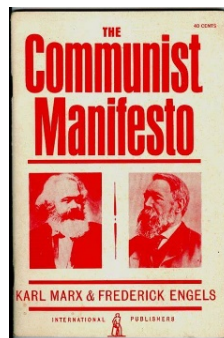
I remember someone once sending me a picture of a fireman who was trying to rescue people from a town called ‘Paradise’ - but which, despite its name, became a kind of hell on earth - as it was about to be engulfed by flames in the wildfires of California. The smoke was thick and the air heavy as the barely visible fireman held out his hand, offering to guide to safety anyone willing to avail themselves of his help; surely a parable for the times in which we live.

Contrasted with the failure, confusion and transience of all other governments and kingdoms we have: -

## **2. The assurance of God’s word, His promises, the growth of the Church worldwide, and the permanence of His Kingdom.**

John reminds us that ‘the world and its desires pass away’ (1 Jn. 2:17). Contrast this with the words of Jesus, [This present] ‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away’ (Mt. 24:35).

And so it has proved to be. Who today is interested in the words of Lenin? Who still reads the words of Marx and Engels in their communist manifesto or the words of Chairman Mao in his little red book?



Solzhenitsyn described Marxism as ‘a sham cardboard theatrical prop .... It clogs up the whole of society – minds, tongues, radio, press – with lies, lies, lies.’ [The Gulag Archipelago, Vol. II, p.617].

A friend was in Russia some years ago and came across a sign rusting away in the long grass which read, 'The words and deeds of Lenin live forever.' I don't think they have, or will.

Meanwhile, the Bible continues to be the world's best seller and the word of God continues to be living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword.

I remember once being asked to speak at a men's dinner which was held in a pub. They told me the dinner would start at 8pm and then I would speak for 20 minutes from around 9.20 until 9.40, leaving another 20 minutes after that for questions. I was told we must finish at 10 pm as the men liked to get away then.

I spoke on the topic "What do men need?" starting with a quote from a feminist writer, who, in answer to this question, said, "Sex and chips". But I went on to say that men cannot live on sex and chips alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

After I finished speaking, the questions just kept coming and coming (admittedly it could have been the wine and beer that loosened tongues!) and eventually the kindly landlord had to ask us all to leave at 11 PM!!

No man, woman, nation, society, kingdom, empire or civilisation can base itself on materialism, sex and chips or bread alone, and say it is truly alive.

However, the living word of God continues to be on the move. Within the next 10-15 years, in terms of Bible translation, we are on the brink of a key milestone in world history.

Potentially, by 2035, everyone in the world could have access to parts of the Bible in a language that speaks to them effectively. The speed of translating God's word is continuing to accelerate.

And it is we Christians, members of the Kingdom of Heaven/God here on earth, who have the assurance of the word made flesh who dwelt among us full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14 &17); who have the confidence of receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28 &29), and we who know that the person who does the will of God lives forever (1 Jn.2:17).

We remember, as citizens here on earth, that our true citizenship is in heaven (Philip. 3:20). We remember, that here on earth, we are subjects of King Jesus - a King that human beings did not crown and cannot, therefore, dethrone.

Add to this the fact that we are looking forward to living in a city which human beings did not build, and cannot therefore destroy (Heb. 11:10 & 12:22), and we see what wonderful and marvellous things the Lord has done, and has prepared, for us. Praise Him!

But I would like to end with this question:

**How does God want us to operate in this world and what priorities does He have for us?**

Using the intercessory section of Jesus' prayer in John 17:6-26, Jesus sees us, his disciples, needing to be in this world, but not of this world, and to this end he prays 5 things: -

1. That we will be protected, by the power of God's name, from the evil one.
2. That we will have the full measure of Jesus' joy in us.
3. That we will be sanctified (kept holy and separate) by the truth of God's word. This means being distinctive in the world and not compromising with, or being conformed to, the world.
4. That we will be united so that the world will find it easier to believe that Jesus is who he says he is.
5. That the love the Father has for Jesus will be in us.

Protection, Joy, Holiness, Unity and Love; these are the things which Jesus continues to pray for us, and as we also pray for these things, we know he hears us and will answer according to his will.



Another priority Jesus has for us is to be sent out into the world as his witnesses, ambassadors, prophets & prophetesses. He said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (Jn. 20:21). And so, we may be mightily encouraged by these global statistics: -

- Today, approx. 95 million Bibles are printed each year. By 2025 the number will have climbed to 110 million.

- Today there are 2.5 billion Christians in the world and by 2050 the number will have topped 3 billion.
- Christianity is the most globalised, the most geographically dispersed and the most culturally and ethnically diverse of all world religions.
- In 1900, 54% of the world's population was unevangelised. Today that percentage has dropped to 28%.
- Mission today is polycentric i.e. From everywhere to everywhere.
- 80% of Christians today live in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

And so it is that God's Kingdom here on earth continues to grow inexorably and Jesus continues to build his Church worldwide. Hallelujah!

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May 2021