

The Kingdom And The Cross

T. Austin-Sparks:

We have explained that the word 'Kingdom' means the sovereign rule of God, and because the words 'the Kingdom of God' occur so frequently in the New Testament I am sure no one will think that the sovereign rule of God only began in New Testament times. The Kingdom of God, which is the sovereign rule of God, has three phases in the Bible, and has the tenses of the past, the present, and the future.

PAST

The Kingdom of God, or the sovereign rule of God, was as much in the Old Testament as it is in the New, but its form was different from what it is in the New Testament. In the past it was outward and temporal. The Kingdom of God then was something which had to do, in an outward way, with the kingdoms of this world. God was ruling amongst and over the nations of this world, and, in a sense, the nations of this world were directly under what is called a theocracy. You will call to mind some of the things that Nebuchadnezzar said about this matter, and Daniel told those heathen kings that they had to learn that God rules in the kingdoms of men. So God's sovereign rule was over the nations in the past. It would be a very interesting and profitable study to see how God was dealing with the nations, but we should need a very large volume for that!

But while the sovereign rule of God was over the nations in the Old Testament, it was centred in and concerning one nation - Israel. You will remember that when Israel asked that they might have a king "like unto the nations", Samuel was very distressed and cried to the Lord, and the Lord said: 'They have not rejected YOU, but they have rejected ME from being King.'

The kingdom in the Old Testament, though, was largely a forecast, or a foreshadowing, of the Kingdom that was coming. That is another big subject by itself, so we just mention it and move on; but you will remember that Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, told the people that David was a type of the Lord Jesus.

That is enough to indicate that the Kingdom was in the Old Testament, that is, in the past.

PRESENT

Now we come into the present - the new phase and aspect of the Kingdom which came with the Lord Jesus. Jesus said: "The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Luke 10:9) and "The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:21 - R.V. margin). The change is that from outside it has come right inside - the sovereign rule of God is now amongst us in this dispensation. Jesus preached the Kingdom of God in relation to Himself. In His own person the sovereign rule of God had entered into this world, and He demonstrated that by many mighty miracles and signs. He said: "If I, by the finger of God cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you" (Luke 11:20 - R.V. margin). But the earthly life of the Lord Jesus was only a parenthetical period, that is, it was something in parenthesis.

On the Day of Pentecost the Kingdom came into this world in power, and this dispensation is the dispensation of the Kingdom amongst us. This is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, that is, in the interests of the Kingdom of God.

FUTURE

We just take a glance at the future aspect, and then we come back to this present. The Kingdom of God is in progress in this dispensation, and in the future it will be in FULLNESS and in finality. With the coming again of the Lord Jesus the third aspect of the Kingdom will begin. Nations shall be gathered to judgment, and all that offends the will of God will be cast outside of this creation. Then, with the new heaven and the new earth, righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, and in the Book of the Revelation we have the cry: "Now is come... the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ" (12:10). "Thine is the kingdom... for ever and ever."

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE CENTRED IN THE CROSS

But all this, past, present and future, is centred in one thing. The sovereign rule of God, or the Kingdom of God, is centred in the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. For the full realization of that Kingdom everything of the past has been moving toward the Cross. Have you noticed that every new sovereign movement of God in the Old Testament was marked by the Cross? The Cross throughout the whole of the Old Testament was represented

by the altar, so you have an altar with Abel, an altar with Noah, an altar with Abraham, an altar with Israel. Every movement of God is marked by the altar, or by the Cross, all pointing toward the great Altar - the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and all future movements of the sovereignty of God begin at, and move from, the Cross.

I want you to grasp this truth. There is no movement of God forward at any time in any matter except on the ground of the Cross. Do you want to go forward with God? Then you must learn something more of the Cross. Do you want to take another step under the government of God? Very well, you must learn something more of the Cross. God's movement forward with His Kingdom is always by way of the Cross.

Now we must bring that nearer home, and to explain it we must come back to the baptism of the Lord Jesus. You remember that John the Baptist was baptizing in the River Jordan, and then Jesus came to him and asked him to baptize Him, but John would have forbidden Him, saying: "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? But Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:14-15). And then it says: "Then he suffereth him." In other words, John baptized Him. And then it says that Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened to Him, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove rested upon Him, and a voice out of heaven said: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." You have all that in the third chapter of the Gospel by Matthew, and let me remind you that the Gospel by Matthew is the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Well, what have we here in the baptism of Jesus? We have four things, and may I say here that these things apply as much to us as they did to the Lord Jesus. They may have a special meaning in His case, but the principle applies to us. That is what the New Testament teaches. What are the four things that we have here?

1. THE KING IDENTIFIED

First of all, the King is identified by heaven - "A voice out of the heavens, saying, This is my beloved Son." the destined King of the universe, the King promised from of old, the Son of Man to whom God has committed the dominion of this world. The King is identified from heaven. God and heaven mark Him out: "This is...". What an immense amount is gathered into those words: "My Son"! It will take us all eternity to exhaust that. Paul says that we have been 'delivered out of the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the Son of his love', and that is why I said that this applies to us also, for we are translated INTO the Kingdom of this Son.

2. THE KING COMMITTING HIMSELF

Secondly, the King committing Himself, and there you have the very heart of the meaning of His baptism, and of baptism. This was the great committal of the King to secure the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is the Kingdom of the will of God - "Thy kingdom come. Thy WILL be done, as in heaven, so on earth" (Matthew 6:10). And Jesus stands there by the Jordan with His feet upon the earth and the heaven open above Him. In His own person He unites heaven and earth, and He says: 'I come to do Thy will, O God. Thou hast prepared a body for Me, and I come into that body to do Thy will' (Hebrews 10:5,7). To use the words of the Apostle Paul, He presented His body "a living sacrifice unto God" (Romans 12:1). What is the meaning of a body? The body is not you and me. This body is not me. Unless the Lord comes, this body will be put in a coffin in the ground, but I shall not be in that coffin. I shall be with the Lord - at least, that is my hope. But what is this body? It is the vessel in which something is to be done for God, and, therefore, the body is given for a vocation. Oh, how the devil is using human bodies for an evil vocation, stealing vessels from God! The body is therefore a vessel for a vocation, and that vocation is the will of God here as in heaven. The body, then, is the means in which a mission is to be fulfilled, and in His baptism the Lord Jesus presented His body for this great mission that He had come to fulfil. As He went down into the waters of Jordan He meant: 'I die from now onward to everything but the will of God', and when He came up out of the water He meant: 'Now life for Me only means the will of God, and nothing else.' He was separated, consecrated and sanctified unto the will of God, and when it is like that the anointing can come upon the life.

The King identified: the King committing Himself - oh, may I stop just a moment before I go on. You see, this is what the Kingdom of God is. It is made up of those who have wholly committed themselves to God. Has everyone here wholly committed himself or herself to God? Have you reached the point of no turning back? Is yours a committed life? Have you said: 'Here, Lord, I give myself away. It is all that I can do'? Or have you still got some ties with the shore? You have pushed a little way out in your boat in Christianity, but you still are playing for safety - you have got your rope tied to the shore so that if it gets a bit stormy you can easily get back. When Jesus was baptized He cut all His ropes. He was wholly committed to His Father 'for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part'. You see, I have just quoted the English Marriage Service. No, death will never part us from Him! But is that how you are married to the Lord?

We shall never get very far with all the teaching until we are wholly committed.

3. THE KING ANOINTED

The third thing: on the ground of His committal, the anointing by the Holy Spirit.

Anointing in the Bible is particularly related to vocation. It is the giving of the Holy Spirit on the ground of total consecration. Now there are not two works of the Holy Spirit; that is, there is not just a Holy Spirit to be a Christian and then another Holy Spirit to be a Christian worker. The Holy Spirit is one, and with one object. He is only given for vocation. You know that that is definitely stated in the Book of the Acts. A little boy was once asked if his father was a Christian, and he replied: 'Yes, I think Father is a Christian, but he is not working at it now!' In England just now there are more than half a million unemployed people, but there is no such thing in the mind of God as an unemployed Christian. The Corinthians were not very good Christians, but even to them the Apostle said: "Now he that stablisheth us with you in Christ, and anointed us, is God" (2 Corinthians 1:21).

The anointing of the Holy Spirit is unto vocation. I cannot tell you what it meant to me when I came to realize this many years ago. I wanted to be a servant of God, but there were all kinds of things that made me realize that I was not fit to be. The work of God is a very great thing. I had known of the gifts that are necessary for the work of God, but I was just without all the things that I felt were necessary. I had never had any of the advantages which I thought were necessary. I was very fond of reading biographies, and I tried to read the biographies of men who had been greatly used of God, but as I took them up I had not got very far before I read that this man who had been so greatly used had a very wonderful Christian home. His father and his grandfather were very godly people, and he inherited some of their godliness, and a great ability to be a servant of God. I would not like to tell you how many biographies were never finished! I said: 'That is not me. I can never be a great servant of God!' Then I discovered the Holy Spirit and I came to see that He makes up for all that we have not got which is necessary to God. The Holy Spirit is the EXTRA to me. He is other than I am, and all that was required of me was that I should present my body a living sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit would do the rest. I cannot tell you what that discovery meant to me! Now, please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that I have become a great servant of the Lord, but I am saying that if the Lord has been able to do anything at all with me, it was the Holy Spirit that did it, and not I. It is the anointing that qualifies us for vocation.

There is a wonderful statement even about Jesus, and I think it is very wonderful when you think who Jesus was. It says: "Jesus of Nazareth, how that, God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil" (Acts 10:38). Even Jesus depended upon the anointing, and it was after the anointing, and not until then, that Jesus embarked upon the mission of God. At the beginning of his Gospel Mark says: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). It was immediately after the baptism and the anointing that He began His ministry concerning the Kingdom of God.

Now a few words on the fourth thing, and then I close for the present.

4. THE KING GOING FORTH TO BATTLE

Immediately Jesus had committed Himself and been baptized, and was anointed with the Holy Spirit, He was driven into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. Now the meaning of the baptism, that is, the committal, the consecration and the anointing, is going to be challenged by the other kingdom. Jesus said: "The prince of this world cometh" (John 14:30), and the prince of this world, the leader of this other kingdom, came to him right there in the wilderness. The right of Jesus to reign was going to be challenged and disputed by the whole kingdom of Satan.

Now note this particularly. We have said that Jesus consecrated Himself wholly to the Father. He took the ground of 'Not My will, but Thy will. Not Myself, but Thyself.' What was the point of the attack by the devil? It was upon the self-life. Self-interest, self-pity, self-realization, self in all its forms, and every form of the self-life was included in the three temptations in the wilderness. I am not going to deal with all that, except to give you the main features and factors.

'You have been anointed with the Holy Spirit and have therefore been given Divine power. Use your Divine gifts for your own ends!' You look at those three temptations again and you see it all summed up in that. 'You have been said to be the Son of God, and therefore you have been put into a very great position. As belonging to God, and being owned by Him, you are in a wonderful position. Use your position for your own glory! You have

The Kingdom And The Cross

an ambition and a vision of world dominion. You are committed to the Kingdom of God. Use your position to get worldly recognition, but remember, Jesus, you will never get world recognition unless you compromise somewhere, so,' says Satan, 'worship me and I will give you all the kingdoms of this world'.

Now every one of those temptations could be enlarged tremendously. Although you may not recognize the various aspects and applications, will you tell me that our battle with the devil is not centred in our own self-life? The devil does not come with a long tail and fire coming out of his mouth. He just comes and says: 'Consider yourself. Be sorry for yourself,' or in one of a thousand ways he brings up self-interest, and do not forget that Jesus was tempted in that way. The greatest servant that God ever had was Jesus Christ, and He was tempted in that way.

The only way through, dear friends, the only way of victory, and the only way of "Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory" is the Cross. Years ago I preached only on the Cross. I thought I knew something about the meaning of the Cross and I was always talking about it, but today, after all these years of learning something of the Cross, I have to say to you that this battle with the self-life is far more severe than ever it was before.

I leave this with you. The men and the women who are most greatly used by God and have most of the power of God are the men and the women who know most of the Cross. The Kingdom, the power, and the glory are centred in the Cross, and the Cross more and more applied to the self-life.