

75 What is (the kingdom of) God like?

Many people see God primarily as a holy God who can't abide sin and who will punish us for our wrongdoing – but he loves us, and he sends Jesus to provide a way of escape. So if we want to know if that's what God is really like, maybe we need to listen to what Jesus (the Word of God) says by his words and actions?

In my studies, I haven't noticed Jesus describing his heavenly Father like that, but he does talk a lot about the kingdom. This is not a concept I know much about, but if Jesus talks about it, I'd better find out! In response to my request for books on the subject, one of you recommended Albert Nolan's *Jesus before Christianity*. Thank you!

Nolan says that, although we can read what Jesus said and did, because we're living 2000 years after the event, and in a totally different culture, it's difficult to decide what he actually *meant* by the things he said. But Nolan is very helpful in that he also looks at other sources – contemporary historical documents – to help us to understand Jesus in his context.

OK, so we start with the Bible, we apply our minds and we thankfully have the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We might like to think that's all we need in order to decide what Jesus meant, but actually we also rely hugely on what the scholars and teachers of the church (such as Nolan) have to say. People have spent lifetimes studying the Bible and have shared their insights with us, to help us understand what God is like. Here's how I see this in diagrammatic terms:

Holy Spirit				What God is like,
+ our minds		->	Interpret the Bible	-> How Jesus saves us,
+ the church				How HS brings growth, etc...

That may be how we have to approach this, but Nolan encourages us to ask first what it was like for the early church, what did *they* understand Jesus to mean? And what claims did Jesus make for himself. Did he actually claim to be God? Indeed, did he give himself any titles?

As I followed Nolan, looking at what Jesus said, in the context of the Jews' expectations of a coming Messiah, I was surprised at how little Jesus actually claimed. He just seems to state things as self-evident in the light of what he was doing, in terms of bringing in God's kingdom.

Don't worry, Nolan is absolutely clear that Jesus is divine, but he is very rigorous in *not* starting from a view of what God is like, and then using that view to interpret Jesus' words and actions:

Our own (Bible-based) view of what God is like			Interpret Jesus' words + actions	->	What God is like, How Jesus saves us, How HS brings growth, etc...
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Nolan points out that Jesus never intended to start a new religion; indeed, Jesus went to great pains to show how religion had trapped and enslaved people. Rather, he started a movement – what he called a kingdom. Initially, it was a rag-bag of individuals who met him, were massively impacted, and even claimed to have met him again and been taught by him *after* he had died.

The early church didn't have the Bible (well, not the NT, anyway), so how did they know what it meant to follow Jesus? They had the oral teachings of Jesus, plus the Old Testament, so here's how I picture that:

Oral tradition of				What God is like		
Jesus' words		→	Interpret the OT	→		What Jesus' kingdom is like
+ Jesus' actions						How Jesus' kingdom grows

(Note my [not so] subtle changes in the results of the interpretation.)

It was this movement, this kingdom, that spread like wildfire and turned the world upside down, transforming people's lives, setting them free from many of the things that bound them – including religion. God's kingdom brought healing, reconciliation (with God and with man), wholeness, love, joy; it broke down barriers of race, class and religion – it was revolutionary!

Sadly, what started as a movement, pretty soon grew structures and rules and religion and dogmas and writings – reams and reams of it over the years.

And today, for the best of reasons, having studied our Bibles, we have decided what God requires of us and tried to spread that knowledge to any and all who will listen. But is that the way we should be doing it today? Does that actually *work*?! Was that the way the early church spread?

I'm beginning to wonder if we should get back to an emphasis on the kingdom of God, here on earth as it is in heaven – which is what Jesus taught us to pray! What would it take? But anyway, what does it *mean*?!

I certainly haven't got it all worked out, but what I *think* I have done, this past two years, is to go back more to what Jesus actually taught and did, and tried to interpret the Bible in the light of those words and actions – especially, trying to view the Old Testament as Jesus saw it.

And what's coming through to me strongly at the moment is that God's kingdom – God's 'good news' – is very much in the here and now, and not just about 'going to heaven when you die'. And this is also coming through from another book I've started reading – again a friend's recommendation about the kingdom: Tom Wright's *Surprised by Hope*.

I tried, in article [73], give an answer to 'What is the gospel?' but as I said in [74] I was unhappy with what I wrote because it was still very personal salvation based, and I didn't feel that this was really the 'good news of the kingdom' as Jesus preached it.

My journey is very much ongoing, as I seek to learn more about God's kingdom. So please talk to me! Let's try to understand together more about this glorious new kingdom and how we can be the answer to our own prayer: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

Lord, let it be!

Paul Bev. 18.6.19