

The Music of the Kingdom

I don't know what your experience may have been with a phrase used often in churches — “the kingdom of heaven” — but I grew up in what might be described today as a “Bible church” and our preachers spent a great deal of time trying to explain the kingdom. Most of what they said seemed dry and unappealing to me until I was 20 years old and quite by accident found a book in a little seaside town in North Wales, a town called Llandudno. The book, entitled *In Quest of a Kingdom*, analyzed the parables of Jesus, and the author, a London minister, used a synonym for “the kingdom of heaven” which I have preferred ever since. He called it, “The kingdom of right relationships.”

The idea of a kingdom was not new to the people Christ talked with — they had had kings before, like David and Solomon — but they had one image of what a kingdom was, and he had a totally different one. They dreamed of power and peace from their enemies, and they thought God would bring in such a kingdom if they were careful not to break one more than 600 rules, or get some ritual wrong. “We may not be happy now,” they told themselves, “but one day the great King will come among us and make everything right. He will replace our poverty with incredible riches, he will change our weak little state into a powerful military force, he will restore our prestige and establish the capital of the world in Jerusalem. Under our king, who will be a true descendant of the great king David, we will win the respect of all nations and punish those who have made us suffer in the past.

If they sound a little like a rightwing paramilitary group, well, in some ways they were like that, and Jesus found himself with the job of trying to disillusion them, gently. He said to them, in effect: “You have dreamed for centuries of the kingdom of God. Let me tell you what it’s really like. In the first place, you must understand that the kingdom you’ve talked about for so long is even now all around you. It is, in fact, within you. It is a matter of right relationship with God, first, and then with other men and women. It involves, above all else, caring about love and justice for everyone.” Most of them didn’t get it, of course, not even when Jesus spoke what may be the most thrilling promise ever made: “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

So this morning, if I were sitting out there listening to this sermon and had not found meaning and direction in life, I’d be saying something like this to myself: “OK, it sounds pretty good, this kingdom of life, this kingdom of right relationships — how do we become a part of it? I mentioned the book I read at 20 — not a great book, just the right book for where I was at that moment in my life — so let me share the analogy by which the author helped me understand the kingdom idea in a new way. One kingdom to which Bob Scott and Pat Jones and our guest Steve give their loyalty is the kingdom of music. What could they say to make you want to enter that kingdom — to enjoy the finest music, perhaps even to create it, and to bring others into the same joyous experience?”

They could tell you to read about the lives of great musicians, but that alone would never bring you into the kingdom of music. You'd know biographies, as some people know all about the life of Christ, but the possession of information guarantees no change of heart or skill. They might say, "Find a teacher and start practicing," but that is certainly not the only way and may result only in someone with technical skill and no soul or feeling at all. Many who can't play a note, and don't understand a scrap of theory, have more real music in their spirits than some brilliant executionists, and are more truly within the kingdom of music — just as some very ordinary people are more truly in the kingdom of God than some great preachers and professors of theology.

What I think they might do — those who love music — is to take you to hear great music executed by the finest artists, and then comment on it in ways that reveal its deepest beauty and meaning. And this is exactly how Christ presented the kingdom of right relationships. His own life, first of all, was a demonstration of what it means to be in that kingdom, and then he tried every way he could think of to describe by analogy with their own experience what that kingdom was. "You've heard of a desperately poor farmer," he says, "who was plowing a stony field one day, expecting nothing but more hard work, and suddenly hitting with his plow a clay jar full of priceless treasure. Well, that's what it is like to discover the kingdom." Over and over he tried to make them see that the kingdom is as joyful as a wedding party, as unselfish as the outpouring of love and support in Oklahoma City over the past week.

When he kept painting the kingdom in those stories he hoped people would be unable to resist it once they truly saw it. It would not have occurred to him that someday we might equate the kingdom idea with words like boredom, burdens, , preachers with professional mannerisms and affected voices, denominational strife, and something called “going to church.” Gordon Cosby, a Washington, D. C. minister, tells of preaching somewhere in New England when the worship was particularly dull and uninspiring. Nobody sang the hymns with feeling; nobody smiled or reacted. The only thing that moved, he said, were the offering plates.

Afterwards, he and his wife, both depressed, went to the room the church had reserved for them in a roadside inn, above a tavern, and they couldn't help comparing the sounds of laughter, music and camaraderie beneath them with the grim, lifeless exercise in religion they had just experienced. He said, “I realized that there was more warmth and fellowship in that tavern than there was in the church I had just left. If Jesus of Nazareth had his choice he would probably have come to the tavern rather to the church we visited.”

I sympathize with Mr. Cosby because I have been in such churches more than once. We were meant to think of the kingdom in the same category with health and beauty, being in love, the trust in a child's face, the spirit of adventure, the thrill of forgetting self for a change, with joy and laughter and strength of purpose — these are the feelings that belong to the kingdom. No preacher would ever have to spend time moralizing if he could successfully describe what the kingdom of right relationships is like.

I want to remind you that this kingdom is always being offered. Every time goodness and truth and beauty besiege you and win a favorable response, you have caught a glimpse of it. An English art critic makes that point in telling a strange little story of the kingdom. He said he had been out on a spring walk with his nurse one morning, on a country road, when some cottage children who were far beneath him in social standing ran out of their garden with little bouquets of flowers, offering their simple gifts to the stylishly dressed little boy who lived in the manor house on the hill. He was moved by their friendly smiles, but he was either afraid or too snobbish to accept, so he frowned at them and ran after his nurse without a word. But he looked back and saw that they were still holding the flowers out as if they were very disappointed, and one was crying at the snub. In later years he said he felt that in a small way, in one of the hundreds of small ways by which it comes, the kingdom of heaven was being offered on the road, and he had refused it.

We understand how such moments happen in the family. We have quarreled, say, perhaps with a child. There is a long silence of resentment (you have known that silence!), and then the child finally breaks the silence with words that in themselves are quite absurd or trifling. “Would you like an apple?” “Shall I open the window?” Those are coded questions. They don’t mean what they say. They really mean, “Shall we make up now and be friends?” And on the answer to the trifling question, a whole relationship depends. By the tone of voice, even, no matter what words we use, we can accept or reject the kingdom as it is offered at that moment.

And this makes another thing clear. Entering the kingdom and possessing it is not simply a matter of baptism or filling out a card or joining a church. My mother told me often that she hoped I would baptize all my grandchildren, and she meant I should immerse them. She knew they had all been christened, dedicated, “baptized” as babies, and she knew they stood a good chance of spending their lives in some church, but none of that was enough. Because in her church, which was once mine, the single open sesame into the kingdom, the one magical act that takes you into the church and makes everything right, is the ceremony of total immersion. In her religion, everything centered so much on that one ritual that she worried far more about getting it done than she did about how the children lived afterwards. But entering the kingdom is not a one-time thing you have done with, as if you deposited money in the bank on which you plan to draw if there is ever an emergency. Entering the kingdom occurs every day. It is offered every day....and you either accept it and live in it daily, or probably not at all.

When Jesus spoke of how the kingdom is an always-present reality for those who are open to it, I can explain that, too, I think, by using a personal story. My daughter-in-law has had her life interrupted by the unplanned arrival of a beautiful little boy, and she is back in the baby kingdom again. She will seem deeply involved with us in conversation and laughter and catching up on things, but the tiniest little cry from the baby’s room, inaudible to the rest of us, and she is instantly gone...first mentally and then physically. The point is that she is never really out of that baby kingdom for a moment. The center of her life is there much of the time, and

all things have to arrange themselves around that point. Even when she lies asleep, she really isn't out of the baby-kingdom, for just an echo of a cry and she is wide awake.

Well, for us, as for her, all sorts of other kingdoms are clamoring to possess us: the kingdom of cut-throat competition, of professional jealousy, of social ambition, of greed, of intellectual superiority, of political strife — we hear the jarring music of those kingdoms all around us, as if someone were spinning the knob of a radio through a score of stations. But ever so often we are surprised by something else. We say the right thing, we do the totally unselfish thing, and suddenly a quiet music fills us, not heard by the ear, and the melody brings an amazing sense of peace. we hear the music of the kingdom of heaven, and the noise of other kingdoms fades away.

I'm hopelessly biased, so you can discount as much of what I say next as you like, but I have found that kingdom more fully in this church than anywhere I have been before. I know, from what you have told me, that this is true for some of you. I also know that sometime during this day and on every single day you and I will be invited into that kingdom by one of a thousand ways. A quiet, reflective communion service helps some people open themselves up to that kingdom, and if it serves you in that way we invite you to join us now in remembering the One in whose name we created this small part of the kingdom.