

***The Un-kingdom of God***  
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Today, I want to talk about one of the most common ways to refer to God. And I want to ask the question, how do people today use this image, and is it helpful or is it outdated?

The image I'm talking about is God as king.

From very early on, the Israelites wanted to show the greatness of God and it was natural for them to compare God with the absolute power, endless resources and ability of the king to provide and protect.

And so, the epitome of Israel's history—during the reign of Solomon and David—embodied the reign of God. Their earthly kingdoms were a vision of the heavenly kingdom of God, the mightiest king of all.

Now, Jesus used the images of the king for God and kingdom for the reality of the Sacred. Only here's the thing: Jesus was making a joke. He was being ironic.

*The kingdom of the parables is not the Kingdom of David and Solomon. On the contrary, the sayings of Jesus demote the royal line, assign the powerful and wealthy to an inferior position, and promote the poor, the tearful, and the dispossessed to the status of the privileged class. It is a Kingdom of nobodies. (Robert Funk)*

For Jesus, the realm of God was an anti-kingdom. But his disciples didn't "get" it then. And most of his followers still don't.

*The God of Jesus does not behave like an oriental monarch. God is not a cosmic bully; God does not force humans to act as they are instructed.*

Through his parables and his actions, Jesus uses the image of the kingdom, but he *turns it upside down*. Even the best kings of the ancient world were contrary to the ways of God.

In the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the city of King David, Jesus mocks the image of the mighty king. Instead of the royal military parade with mighty chariots and horses, Jesus rides into town on a donkey. He subverted the image of the kingdom. As a piece of street theater it was brilliant and comic. But the crowd doesn't "get" it. And most of Jesus' followers through the centuries don't get it, either.

And so instead they write all these hymns about God as a great king, and they talk about God as a ruler who wages war, violently destroys enemies, and punishes his disobedient subjects.

Richard Rohr has this great line: "Your image of God creates you." And so if we are working with an image of God as this violent, punishing, fear inducing king, what kind of people does this create?

But Jesus spoke against the dominant tradition, even though this tradition has hijacked Jesus, himself, and uses his name to dominate and exclude other people and religions.

The Greek word for kingdom is *basileia*. And when it was used, this word is most often translated as “empire.” Now, many modern folks, when they hear “kingdom of God” think that it sounds too harsh, too male, too domineering—and they are right, of course. So they translated *basileia* as “reign” or “realm” of God to make it more consistent with the loving nature of God that we see in Jesus. But here is what I say: They have the right diagnosis but the wrong cure. Instead of softening the term, I would make it harder, in some cases. I’d use “empire.” Why? Well, first, because empire was a political term. When Jesus used the term empire everyone immediately thought of *the* empire, the empire of Rome. To speak of the empire of God would have been considered subversive and very risky.

I believe that Jesus was challenging the unjust empire of Rome with its severe disparity and inequality. It was a system where most of the people lived on the edge and the powerful exploited and oppressed the average person.

To say that God is king does not so much define God as it re-defines how rulers, leaders and governments act should act.

The system was rigged. A very small number of wealthy people called the shots, using people as a means to an end in the production of their wealth. And so when Jesus used that word, he was challenging the unfairness and injustice of the system. He was siding with the little people, not the powerful ones. *He was challenging the very idea of empire itself.* Jesus was being very pointed and ironic and political. It would be like using “the regime of God.”

One person who understood this was Martin Niemöller, a Lutheran pastor who died after eight years in the Dachau concentration camp for resisting the Nazi regime in World War II. He wrote a book of sermons titled, *Christ is My Führer*. Now you might laugh—the same way those laughed at Jesus’ phrase, “kingdom of God.” And my point is that we’ve lost that laugh of recognition.

So the words of Jesus stayed the same, but we have almost completely lost that sense of irony. The word just rolls off our 21<sup>st</sup> century lips with little awareness: “thy kingdom come...” And then we think of God’s kingdom or empire as—well—an *empire*, one that will also destroy and dominate all other empires. For that is what empires do.

Look, I can understand other progressives who avoid the image of God as king altogether. Probably better not to use it at all than to use it uncritically. But when we change the words and use “realm” or “kin-dom” or “domain” for the word, “kingdom” or “empire”—as understandable as that change might be—we lose the tension that Jesus created when he used *basileia* or its Arabic equivalent. We lose the irony and the politically subversive quality of the term.

And so a progressive view, it seems to me, understands the limitations of language and the impossibility of finding the perfect translation sometimes as we attempt to span millennia and cultures. Perhaps we should use “king” or “emperor” to describe God and terms “kingdom” or “empire” of God. But we should use them sparingly and carefully, treating them like nitroglycerin.

I like how Robert Funk addressed this dilemma. He refers to it as “the un-kingdom of God.” The un-kingdom of God is about God’s justice in contrast to the systemic injustice of all kingdoms and empires of this world.

For Jesus, of course, God is great and majestic, but not the kind of greatness and majesty we see in the empire:

not in military power,  
not in the mansions and castles of the rich,  
not in the impressive technologies,  
not in tall steeples,  
not in popularity,  
not in political power.

But rather, the un-kingdom, the un-empire of God is not we expect it to be. It is where  
the last are the first,  
the least are the greatest,  
the weak are the strong.

Who is in it? The homeless, the sick, the forgotten, the losers, the unsuccessful, the uneducated, the unrighteous sinners, the poor, the discarded. It is a kingdom where the dignity and value of every person is upheld, and its greatness and majesty is in the justice and compassion exhibited for all. One must become like a lowly, insignificant child to enter it.

Marcus Borg explains it this way: There is throughout history a struggle between two competing theologies, Elite theology and Prophetic theology. Elite theology is the “yes-man” of the king. It represents the royalty, the military, the power establishment, the wealth. And this theology has always dominated.

Prophetic theology, on the other hand, exists on the margins. It represents, like Jesus, those on the edge, the outsiders. To be a follower of Jesus means to be in the prophetic tradition and to be on the outside. They would agree with Anais Nin who said, “If you’re not living on the edge, you’re taking up too much space.”

But almost immediately the tradition of Jesus was taken over by Elite theology. Under Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity became the official religion of the empire, and not the un-empire.

There has always been a problem of domesticating Jesus and de-radicalizing his message about the kingdom of God. Traditional theology quickly forgets that Jesus turned the image of God as king upside down.

And Jesus spoke of the un-kingdom by using parables, comparing it to many unlikely and surprising things. One of my favorites is the parable of the mustard seed.

*The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like.” He said, “It’s like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky.”*

The gospel writers and Jesus' contemporaries did not appreciate Jesus' humor and saw the tiny mustard seed as an inadequate metaphor for God's great kingdom. Jesus Seminar scholars point out:

*The mustard seed is proverbial for its smallness. The mustard plant is actually an annual shrub or weed, yet in Matthew and Luke it becomes a "tree," while in Mark it becomes the "biggest tree" of all garden plants. Only in Thomas does it remain simply "a large plant."*

The gospels were written about 30 to 40 years after Jesus died. And almost immediately the gospel writers tried to rescue the image of the mighty kingdom by revising Jesus' words.

*...In his use of this metaphor, Jesus is understating the image for comic effect: the mighty cedar (the Hebrew symbol for a towering empire) is now an ordinary weed. This is a parody. For Jesus, God's domain was a modest affair, not a new world empire. It was pervasive but unrecognized, rather than noisy or arresting. (The Five Gospels, p. 484)*

But the un-kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is here but hidden, like a tiny seed planted at the heart of each moment. It's not somewhere in the future, about to come with majesty, force and violence. It is already here, growing, blossoming. It's like a weed, persistent, spreading, impossible to kill.

As Alfred North Whitehead wrote:

*The life of Christ is not an exhibition of overruling power. Its glory is for those who can discern it, and not for the world. Its power lies in its absence of force...*

*If the modern world is to find God, it must do so through love and not through fear.*

We always live in these two kingdoms: a kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. And the second one, the hidden un-kingdom, is always subverting the other. And the image of God as king is a subversive image. It doesn't bless the status quo; it challenges it. It doesn't define God; it redefines the world. It calls us to change how we govern a nation and truly make it great.