God’s Reign—Not Ours

“To What Shall We Compare the Kingdom of God?”

† Barbara E. Bowe

Justice, compassion, mercy, inclusion, and forgiveness are the essential characteristics of God’s people in this new reign that God is bringing to birth for us. We live now in the in-between time waiting for the fullness of God’s kingdom to come among us. We are summoned to become parish communities who witness to the reign of God taking root among us and establish those same values in our families and communities, in our world and in the whole cosmos.

Signs in our world that point to the promise and the possibility of God’s presence in our midst (what the gospels call the “reign of God”) are all around, if we but stop to notice. Let us look at a few recent examples:

• Generous men and women of all ages, races, and religious beliefs who are skilled medical doctors and members of the organization called Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières. They generously volunteer their services in the poorest and least developed parts of the world in order to alleviate suffering and bring joy to people’s lives. They go to warring nations, conflict-ridden spots where violence afflicts especially the innocent. They risk their lives to save others.

• The young and old, famous and quite ordinary, black and white, rich and poor who traveled to New Orleans and the Mississippi delta in the immediate

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aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to rebuild homes, to offer health care, to organize recovery efforts, and simply to “be with” those who are suffering.

- A whole Amish community of hardworking, faith-filled people transcended their personal grief and justifiable anger, and refused to retaliate after a young man opened fire in their schoolhouse killing several of their children. Instead they offered their forgiveness and healing to the family of the young man.

- A man instinctively jumped down onto the subway tracks to lay his body over a fallen commuter who was about to be run over by the oncoming train.

- Teenagers in Minnesota risked their own lives to rescue an elderly woman whose car had stopped on the railroad tracks.

- Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Dorothy Stang spent 40 years of her life working for justice among the poorest Brazilian farmers trying, with them, to preserve the Amazon forest. In response, she was brutally assassinated by the military for her commitment to justice.

These signs of the in-breaking of the attitudes and commitments of God’s reign show us what God desires for us as a people: generosity, forgiveness, solidarity, compassion, hope. These are the characteristics that every parish seeks to foster in its members if it is to be a “missionary parish.” In every Eucharist we are sent out to be the type of Christians we pray to be with God’s help. This attitude is what it means to embrace the reign of God in all its power.

And yet, we know that contradictory signs of hatred, divisions, racism, and injustice also tell us that the fullness of God’s reign is not yet realized in our midst. And so, each day, again and again throughout our lives, we pray the familiar words of the Our Father: “Thy Kingdom come!” In praying these familiar words, we stand with all those who have gone before us in faith. We have inherited from our biblical ancestors a conviction that God has a vision for our world—called “the reign of God”—and that God calls us to cooperate with its birth among us, to commit ourselves to its values, and to join in welcoming this kingdom that God is building in our midst.

What is this Kingdom of God?

As Christians, as people who desire to be disciples of Jesus, we are called to be messengers of the reign of God; we are called to be agents of God’s...
We are called to commit ourselves to live in such a way that we become heralds of the kingdom, heralds of God's good news for the world. The reason we exist as a parish is to be servants of the kingdom, people dedicated to the reign of God.

"Kingdom"...? "Reign"...? These are not exactly everyday household words used frequently in our ordinary U.S. English vocabulary. Perhaps if we were British citizens and were accustomed to hearing about royalty and palaces in our midst, these words might carry some meaning for us. As it is, they sometimes ring empty in our ears. Yet they convey notions of strength, ideas of power, authority, and might. They connote military power, ruling authority, and the power to exercise one's will over others. They conjure up images such as one of the Roman Emperor Augustus—the all-powerful emperor in the Roman world of Jesus' day.

What are the Signs of the Presence of God?

If these images mark the Roman world, “to what shall we compare the kingdom of God...” (Mark 4:30)? That is a question that Jesus posed to his followers and one that preoccupies us to this day. What does it mean to speak of God's kingdom? What could it mean to talk of God's reign? First of all, the expression “reign of God” is a way of speaking, a phrase that tries to describe the conditions of a world and its people who are truly living and acting in accordance with God's desires and hopes for us, God's people. This phrase points toward God's love and relentless desire for the life of the world. When God's desires for the world are truly reigning in our lives, then extraordinarily grace-filled things happen in our midst. There are signs in our midst that point toward that kingdom, examples of God's loving presence breaking into our world and transforming our hearts as a foretaste, a promise of what is to come fully only at the end of time.

As Christians and members of a parish family, we need to adjust our antennae, so to speak, to acquire the gifts of attention and analysis, the gift of discernment—a gift of the Spirit that attunes us to the ways of God—so that we might notice and be aware of people and situations in our world that point toward the reality we call the “reign of God.” We must pray for the grace to be able to read the signs of the times and to perceive where God is active in our lives today. We ask the grace to listen to how God is calling us to be God's own people who live truly in fidelity to God's purposes.

God as King

Why does the Bible use this royal image of a king? For the ancient Israelites, their God was imaged as a king, as the psalmist praised: “Sing praises to
God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm. God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (Ps 47:6-8).

No other sovereign of any nation could compare to their God’s strength, might, wisdom, and power. In a world of competing royal kingdoms, Israel claimed a superior king, the Lord, the almighty. For ancient Israel this familiar image and political role, drawn from their own sociopolitical context, became one of the best ways for them to image their God. But soon they, too, wanted a human king to rule over them on earth as God reigned in the heavens. First Saul, then David and Solomon, and then in the dynasties that followed in the north and in the south, kings assumed total power. These kings centralized the religious practices in the city of Jerusalem (Deut 12:1-9), they conquered territories (2 Sam 21:15-22), confiscated property (2 Sam 12:1-25), they forced their citizens into military service (1 Sam 8:1-18), and failed to act like true shepherds of the people (Ezek 34) as God had instructed them to do. Kingship became identified with broken promises, with the abuse of power, and with manipulation of justice. But still the people longed for a noble king and shepherd who would be God’s representative in their midst. So through the years, the people imagined such a king whom God would raise up and establish for them, someone whose kingdom would be a kingdom of peace and justice.

The prophets, especially, kept this hope alive. These visions are what we hear each Advent season, for example, in the beautiful prophecies of Isaiah:

For a child has been born for us,
    a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
    and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
    Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
    and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
    He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
    from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isa 9:6-7)

**Hope for a Kingdom of Peace**

Kingship, the people believed, did not have to be synonymous with misuse of power; it could be an image of God’s justice and *shalom*. *Shalom* is an especially
important Hebrew word in the Old Testament. It is usually translated by the English word “peace.” But it means much more than the absence of conflict. It means prosperity, joy, wholeness, contentment, and all good things. When the biblical prophets offered a vision of shalom as God’s gift for the future, they dreamt of a future time when God’s intentions for the world would become realized—when God’s kingdom would be established. It would be a time of peace and harmony, imagined in the beautiful image of the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and kid, the calf and lion together, with no harm or ruin on all God’s holy mountain (Isa 11:6-9). Extravagant visions of banquet tables where all would be welcome and fed (Isa 25:6-8), deserts becoming fertile (Isa 51:3), and little children leading the people (Isa 11:6) filled their hopes and their dreams for what God would do in the future.

But, in the real world of their lives and history, these dreams seemed not to come true:

- Instead of peace they faced constant warfare
- Instead of feasting, often famine
- Instead of fertility, barrenness.

Still the hope remained of a time when God’s reign would be realized once and for all. It was the prophets again who encouraged the people not to lose hope. Habakkuk, among others, writing on the eve of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, urged them to keep the vision alive with these words: “For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab 2:3).

And so through the agonizing years of Exile (586-538 BCE), while being aliens under Persian rule (538-333 BCE), after the conquest of Alexander in the Hellenistic Kingdom that followed (333-63 BCE), the people continued to believe resolutely in God’s promise and God’s vision for a people faithful to the divine rule. When the heavy grip of Rome seemed to squelch all their hopes forever, still they longed for God’s kingdom to come in their midst. But now they hoped for a new world and a new age that God would fashion only after destroying the wicked world in which they lived.

This view of the reign of God placed all hopes into some future time and place where God’s desires for all creation would be realized. Those who shared this understanding of the kingdom found hope and assurance in the midst of their suffering, but the downside of such a view means that they had given up on history as a place where the kingdom would be manifest. The people had decided that this world is so corrupt, so thoroughly evil, that it could never learn to respond to God’s desires and designs. Instead they placed all their hopes in the New Age that would appear at the end of time, after this world and this age had been utterly and totally destroyed. So in that view, it didn’t matter what your situation was in
this age, the only thing that mattered was the age to come. Pressed to its limits, this view is very dangerous because it could be seen as wishing for “pie in the sky by and by” without a concern for the day-to-day reality and the sufferings of people in this world. But God was about to do a new thing among them.

**Emmanuel, God with Us**

Then into human time and place came the man from Nazareth, the one whom Matthew would call, “Emmanuel, God with us” (Matt 1:23, quoting Isa 7:14). Each of the gospels, but especially the synoptics, portray Jesus as the herald of the kingdom. In Mark, Jesus’ opening words announce the nearness of God’s kingdom:

> “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

What was this “good news,” this gospel that Jesus preached, and more importantly demonstrated by his deeds among the people? All the hopes of their ancestors had burned into them the belief in God’s fidelity and the promise of God’s salvation. The people of Jesus’ day believed they would be freed from all the evil powers that held them in chains: both from the grip of spiritual demons and from the human powers that crushed them and drained them of life. God’s kingdom, they thought, was to be a political one ushering in victory over their enemies. But Jesus spoke a different word:

So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45)

**The In-Breaking of the Reign of God**

In a mysterious way these first century followers did not fully understand, they came to learn that Jesus’ own life marked the in-breaking of God’s kingdom. Jesus announced to them that God’s mercy and forgiveness, God’s healing power, God’s compassion and steadfast love were readily at hand. God’s presence with them was no longer exclusively in the religious signs they once knew, but now could be found
in Jesus himself and in the many acts of love that they were called to do for one another each day. When asked by the followers of John the Baptist if he was, indeed, the one who was to come or if they should keep looking for another, Jesus replied:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me. (Luke 7:22-23; Matt 11:4-6)

This kingdom that Jesus preached was not a place, not a geographic location, but a way of living one’s life in fidelity to God’s desires for wholeness and life for all people. The kingdom of God is about the blind seeing, lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, those who are dead experiencing new life, and most especially about the poor receiving the good news of God’s blessings. This is what Jesus’ words and deeds announced—a new way of being human together, a new way of being God’s people (Lev 26:12), people who truly image the God who created them.

The kingdom is about what we do and how we live. It is not about only what we say we believe; it is more about forgiveness and mercy than about regulations and creeds. When each one of us is baptized into Christ, we (or our sponsors and parents on our behalf) make a solemn commitment to follow in the way of Jesus, to be members of the body of Christ and to live according to that identity. To be a follower of Jesus means that we imitate the values and choices of his life, in order to follow his way of being with people. In fact, Acts (9:2; 18:25; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) tells us that a favorite name for the first disciples of Jesus was the “followers of the Way.” That is what we are called to be as parishes—followers of “the Way.”

**Parables of the Kingdom**

In answer to the question in the gospels: “To what shall we compare the kingdom of God?” Jesus did not give a lecture, or lay out a list of the ten essential components that define the kingdom. He did not instruct his audience on the philosophical meaning of God’s reign. Instead, he told stories. These stories we call parables. Parables are also riddles, puzzling stories that call us to ponder and think about their meaning.

Jesus’ parables are short and vivid narratives that depict different scenes that we are meant to imagine and to ponder. They are open-ended and leave us more often with a question than an answer. The nature of parables is that they refuse to give a direct answer to our question about the kingdom. Instead, they challenge us to think, to ponder, and to decide.

Jesus tells his followers: think about a mustard seed (Matt 13:31), think about a sower sowing seed (Mark 4:3-9), think about a woman searching her house for a lost
The values of the kingdom of God . . . are the values that Jesus preached and lived.

The Reign of God Calls Us to a New Set of Values

To speak of God's kingdom is to speak about this different set of values that call for our allegiance. The vision of the kingdom of God summons us to a way of life that corresponds to God's intent for all creation. This intention, this dream, God has revealed to us in Jesus. Jesus' life was marked by an inclusive table fellowship with sinner and with saint. His ministry extended unlimited forgiveness, healing,
and compassion especially to those on the margins. He showed us that religious
systems are in the service of humanity, not the other way around: “For the Sabbath
was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Time and time again, in all of the gospel stories, Jesus’ actions embody the very
compassion of God and this compassion often trumps the demands of religious
law. The same God who was revealed at Sinai as the One who is “The Lord, the
Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love
and faithfulness . . .” (Exod 34:6) came near to us in Jesus. Justice, compassion,
mercy, inclusion, and forgiveness are the essential characteristics of God’s people
in this new kingdom that God is bringing to birth for us. We live now in the in-
between time waiting for the fullness of God’s kingdom to come among us. We
pray for its coming daily. But as we pray, as a parish we also must work tirelessly
to establish those same values in our parishes and families and communities, in
our world and in the whole cosmos.

*The Reign of God is Like a Barrio Fiesta*

A n image that I love and that speaks to me of what God’s reign might look
like is a barrio fiesta. In the Philippines where I lived for three years, small
rural villages (called *barrios*) celebrated once a year their fiesta. All the villag-
ers—old and young, families, small shopkeepers, priests and nuns, children, work-
ers—the entire village would plan for months to prepare for the celebration. Food
and drinks were brought by all to share with one another. Music and songs, parades
and dances, games for the children, time for prayer and thanking God for life would
make up the various parts of the celebration.

In the barrio fiestas I saw ordinary people sharing life to the full. They expressed
thanks to God and they celebrated their bondedness to one another. Joy was abun-
dant; forgiveness, real; and solidarity as a people evident in all that they did. The
biblical *shalom* (peace, prosperity, harmony, exuberance) is an appropriate way
to describe their activity. Though extremely poor in possessions, they were rich in
the gifts of God that truly reflect God’s kingdom. They celebrated in those days
a foretaste of the future joy and gladness that is to mark the fullness of God’s
kingdom come. These barrio fiestas are a modern day example, in Filipino life, of
the biblical “Messianic banquet,” a rich and lavish image of God’s abundant bless-
ings that would be poured out to God’s holy people in the end of time.

*Reign Inevitably Encompasses the Cross*

T he values of God’s kingdom that Jesus lived and taught led him to the cross.
This fate was not because he chose to die, but because he chose to live in a
way that put him on a collision course with the religious and political powers of his day. Isn’t that what Sister Dorothy Stang did also, or Archbishop Romero, or Martin Luther King—live in a way that led to the cross? In the fidelity of Jesus’ life and death and in the mystery of his resurrection, God revealed to the world a new vision of God’s hope for humanity. When we lay down our lives for one another, in the name of Jesus, we move closer to that dream. In our willingness to extend forgiveness to friend and foe alike, we learn that the mystery of this kingdom offers us life to the full. When we fearlessly proclaim gospel values, in the face of all opposition, we move one step closer to its certain coming. In our common celebrations of life, in our solidarity with those who suffer, in our willingness to welcome stranger and friend—we move toward God’s kingdom among us. When we see the breaking down of barriers and the building of bridges of peace and understanding among people—here are the inaugural signs of the kingdom of God among us. And so we, too, become people and parish communities who witness to the reign of God taking root among us.

**The Cross Leads to Resurrection**

For Christians, the source and font of all our hope beyond death is, of course, our belief in the Resurrection. As parish families, we are Easter people, grounded in an unshakeable belief in life. It is always important to remember that the story of Jesus did not end with the cross, or with Jesus’ cry of despair to his Abba whom he thought had abandoned him (Mark 15:34). All four gospels, each in a different way, convey the faith of the early Christians that the tomb was empty and that he was alive! God had indeed vindicated Jesus; his words and deeds were true and throughout his public ministry they testified to the reign of God beginning in Jesus’ own life. Belief in Jesus’ Resurrection, and our confident hope in our own life after death, points us always to the future—to that time when the fullness of God’s life giving and transformative power will recreate the world as we know it. This vision of what God will do in our midst is what we mean when we long for God’s kingdom to come. No amount of human endeavor, no political program, no set of economic agendas can accomplish this work of total transformation. Surely we can—and must—cooperate with God’s action in our midst, but in the end, it is God’s reign, not one of our making. The source is God, but we are the collaborators with God in welcoming and nurturing the seeds of God’s reign among us.

**A Redoubled Commitment**

Unfortunately, however, all we need to do is to read the daily newspaper to know that we are a long, long way from the fullness of the reign of God.
Although announced and inaugurated in the coming of Jesus, the reign of God is still “not yet” realized in our midst. And so our daily prayer for the coming of this reign, “Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven,” needs to be matched by redoubled commitment to live these values now and to work with all our strength for their realization in the world today. Even as we embrace this prophetic task we do so knowing that the fullness of God’s reign will finally come only at the end of time in God’s future and according to God’s promise. It is ultimately God’s doing, not ours alone. But God invites us, as communities, parishes, families, nations, all disciples of Jesus to participate in the coming of this reign with all our talents and energies and with the full gift of our lives. To be a missionary parish is to be a servant of God’s reign, to be people committed to these values, to be baptized into this way of life.

Resources
