

St Martin's CONNECT 9th-23rd Feb 2011
Prosperity and suffering: Challenges and questions
Leader's notes

WEEK 3 (23rd Feb 2011)

3. Suffering in the context of the Kingdom

Introduction

During week 1 we thought about the challenges of Jesus' words in the New Testament regarding wealth and the Old Testament idea that God is generous and self giving yet warned against pride in riches and possession. We concluded that these must be held in dynamic tension. Last week we thought about God and the problem of evil. We did a bit of pub philosophy and thought about the factors involved in wrestling with the goodness of God and the terror of evil. Tonight we are setting both of these in the context of the Kingdom of God. A clear understanding of the Kingdom of God helps us to fathom the bewildering issues surrounding suffering and evil. We at St Martin's are a Kingdom church. It's central to our teaching on mission and ministry. The Kingdom of God was absolutely central to Jesus ministry. In fact Jesus by announcing or inaugurating the Kingdom was in fact saying to his listeners. 'I am the Kingdom of God' wherever I am the Kingdom is there also. The presence of the Kingdom is made manifest by me. It's Jesus central theme.

Why is the Kingdom so important?

OT

The Kingdom of God is important because as we've said it is Jesus central theme in the majority of his ministry. He comes to proclaim the Kingdom and demonstrate its reality by healing, casting out demons, bringing people to repentance and into reconciliation with the Father. But to understand the Kingdom of God we need to work backwards a little bit and see how the Israelites understood the kingdom of God or the expectation of the Kingdom of God in the Old Testament. There is a great deal of rich imagery regarding the kingdom in the Old Testament which we don't have time to explore¹ suffice to say that there are two statements that sum up the tension in the OT.

- The Lord is King (Psalm 24:10, 29:10, 47:2, 99:4)
- The Lord *will* become King (Isaiah 32:1)

Whilst the people of Israel acknowledged that YAHWEH was King there was a sense especially in the prophets (Isaiah, Joel etc) that there was to be a consummation of the Kingdom that one the Lord would rule, that injustice would be stamped out, that the oppressors of the people would come under God's judgement and there would be freedom. This was seen as a cataclysmic event when the son of man would come to reign in glory, in fullness. This was sometimes called the 'day of the Lord' (Isaiah 61:2b) The King would come in justice the spirit poured out abundantly. A new era. The presence of the future final reign of God! But when Jesus came his proclamation of the Kingdom was very different from the expectations of a large majority of the Jews. The Kingdom was mystery, veiled, shrouded, seemingly small and insignificant yet would grow to be something unique.

NT

Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom of God. He proclaims, preaches about the Kingdom and then demonstrates its present reality by healing, casting out demons etc. We will look at a few Kingdom of God sayings in Luke's gospel because there are so many we don't have time to cover them all. 'The Kingdom of God is near' (10:9,11) 'The Kingdom if God does not come visibly' (17:20) 'What is the Kingdom of God like?' (13:18) 'There was confusion surrounding the Kingdom' (19:11) 'The Kingdom was explained in parables' (13:18-21). Two statements can be made (although it is slightly more complex than this) about the Kingdom in the NT

- The Kingdom is present (Luke 17:21)
- The Kingdom of God *will* come (Luke 22:15&18)

¹ Three excellent books for those who've been Christians for a while are Derek Morphew 'Breakthrough: Discovering the Kingdom', G.E. Ladd 'The presence of the Future', Donald Kraybill 'The Upside Down Kingdom'.



This diagram gives a helpful description of the age we live in and the tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of the Kingdom of God. A helpful illustration from NT scholar Oscar Cullmann goes like this:

'The final push for the Allied invasion of Europe was called D Day. As later history has shown, this was the decisive battle of the Second World War. Once the Allies had successfully set up a military position within Europe, it was only a matter of time before Hitler's armies were defeated. However, D Day was not the end of the war. It took months before all the axis powers were mopped up and Hitler surrendered. V Day was the moment of final victory. The time in between was a time of delay of not yet.' The Kingdom is similar. The Kingdom that will break through in the future when Christ comes to reign in glory, when God will make all things new is the Kingdom that broke through in Jesus Christ - in his death and resurrection.

Suffering and the Kingdom

It's important to understand that suffering needs to be seen in this context. In the 'now' and 'not yet'. Suffering in the form of persecution was a very real issue for the early church (2 Peter 1:1, James 1). The kingdom of God offers hope.

Suffering from bodily sickness needs to be understood in the light of the Kingdom. It's not that God doesn't have the power to heal but that the final consummation of all things, where sickness, and death will only be but a memory is delayed. The mystery is that some are healed, some are relieved from sufferings others are not. We don't have flippant answers as to why.

Suffering of course has other forms where the Kingdom of God need not explain things away. The suffering from the consequences of sin for example do not need to be understood in the framework of the Kingdom. King David suffered incredible emotional pain after his affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent loss of the child they had together (2 Samuel 12:16ff). But the Kingdom of God helps us realise we are 'messed up kids' not some extent. We are both 'now' and 'not yet'. We are being transformed, sanctified, changed but we still mess up, make mistakes. Paul at the end of 1 Corinthians notes that we will be transformed in the 'twinkling of an eye' when the resurrected King returns but we don't quite know how.

Suffering experienced by the innocent is probably most difficult for us to deal with on an emotional and moral level. Evil lurks in the most unlikely places. The abuse of children, the torture of innocent political prisoners, genocide (moral evil), the death of thousands in a mud slide, starvation, earthquakes, famine and pestilence (physical evil). These tragedies, strains, stresses and upheavals are best understood again in the light or the context of the Kingdom. This does not mean we dismiss them but we wrestle with them. We are confronted with the evil that exists in us and our tendencies toward wrong doing. These are sometimes only kept in check by social constraint rather than real inward transformation.