

**Lenten Speaker Series 2010:**  
*The Coming of the Kingdom*  
Father David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Repent *and* you will be saved!”

You might see *this phrase* on bumper stickers or on community church signs – if you drive south into the United States you might even see it on residential lawns. Whether we like it *or not*, and whether we choose to close our eyes and grimace at it *or not*, the public face of Christianity, in North America, is routinely presented as “Repent or burn!”

The increasingly popular, black and white theology of many North American, evangelical, fundamentalist churches, offers a portrayal of a God, reigning over the individuals of the world, declaring them to be either in or out, chosen or not. Preachers in these big box churches tend to present a worldview, which instructs individuals to accept Jesus Christ as their personal saviour – for the consequences of not doing so, result in an eternity of fire and hell.

This theological philosophy robs God of any possible compassion or grace, and reduces God, to merely an executioner.

In an era, when Christian churches are struggling to maintain relevance in North America – this is the most prevalent face understood to represent the church. For the masses of the emerging generation who have not been raised with the Christian narrative – television and movies have reduced Christianity, regardless of denomination, to an anti intellectual, xenophobic fringe group, which preaches a *judgmental* Kingdom, where you are ‘saved’ or not.

Ironically, *this* representation of faith harkens back to the world in which Jesus public life began.

Much of the Judeo world of the early first century, awaited the hand of God to rescue the oppressed from foreign occupation; saving God’s chosen people from a life of despair. In their worldview of ‘Kingdom,’ Caesar was upon the throne, Antipas ruled from the local palace – and God’s people, as they understood themselves to be, were suppressed in their promised land. The only logical explanation, from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish worldview, was that their subjugation was directly as a result of losing God’s favour, and they were consequently being penalized at the hand of God.

Into *this world* came the well known gospel character of John the Baptist. John clearly accepted *this* theology, by which God rewarded or punished Israel, according to its obedience or disobedience of God. We know this, because out of his fear of God’s wrath, the Baptist led all those who would follow him, out into the wilderness of the Jordan River, walking them through its waters, so that they might purify themselves, and be prepared for the imminent threat of the mighty Kingship and Reign of God.

“Repent *and* you will be saved!” Sounds familiar.

Into the world of the Baptism Movement of John, enters a man from Nazareth named Jesus. Although Jesus espouses both John and his followers, in Jesus, the movement sees a radical paradigm shift, departing from John the Baptist, and those who went before him – from the declaration of an imminent coming of the Kingdom, whereby God would clean up the world, judging the masses, and saving the faithful – to Jesus, who reigns in a Kingdom, which he declares, has already begun.

Jesus proclaims to the world, “You have been waiting for God, while God has been waiting for YOU!”

This paradigm shift transforms the concept of the coming of the Kingdom, to a place, and to time, where God will not *happen* to God’s people, but God’s people will be interactive, participatory, and collaborative *with* God.

It is not hard to imagine the confusion on the faces of the 1<sup>st</sup> century followers. John had proclaimed the coming of a transformative Kingdom, which was near – and without much visible change in the world around them, Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was not only coming, it was already here!

Jesus followers must have looked dumbfounded as they listened to his words. “The Kingdom is here???” Caesar still ruled the known world, Antipas still resided comfortably in his palace, and they, *God’s chosen people*, were still an oppressed minority at the bottom of the barrel! “Some Kingdom!” I imagine many of them would have said.

John had told them that all they had to do was purify themselves in the Jordan River and God would do the rest – Jesus comes along as says “No! God has a bigger plan for you – it’s time for you to get *your* hands dirty, it’s time for *you* to become messengers of God!”

I can see why many of them would have found John’s plan more appealing.

It is no wonder that parts of the modern church have shifted back in their depictions of an authoritarian God; because *that* is the ‘Kingdom’ they see in our world. Entire continents of wealth, dictate policy and procedure on the world stage, while less fortunate continents in the world strive to feed their hungry, and shelter their people. Success in much of the corporate world is determined by how much money you can make, at the cost of how few people you have to pay.

In our North American, modern world, power is displayed in the hands of those who dominate.

Whether it is in the first century, or the twenty-first century, it is much easier to propagate the images of a vengeful God, and proclaim oneself as ‘saved,’ because it absolves oneself from the larger community obligations in God’s Kingdom. Whether

you have purified yourself through the waters of the Jordan River, or whether you have saved yourself by accepting Jesus Christ as your personal saviour; the theology of *personal salvation* encourages oneself to look inwards for God, rather than in the eyes of the suffering in front of us. Those who preach to the masses about salvation which only benefits *the individual*, give permission to divert our attention from the affliction of those outside our walls, and outside our borders.

This pre Christian theology of leaving the problems of the world for God to deal with, while purifying ourselves for God, are two totally opposing philosophies, which couldn't be more antithetical to one another.

Perhaps the most important distinction within the paradigm shift of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, is that to stop John's Baptism Movement, all one had to do was to kill John. There were no 'baptizing stations' up and down the Jordan, for your purification convenience, so once John was out of the way, his movement could be shut down, because it was entirely dependent on him.

On the other hand, Jesus does not establish himself in a single physical place and instruct his disciples to bring individuals to him for all eternity – instead he empowers his disciples to go out into the world, to become Christ like agents of hope, healing and change. The world could go ahead and crucify Jesus, but God's partnership with God's people had already begun to spread out into that same world.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, "God without us, will not – as we without God, cannot."

The Coming of the Kingdom is felt in tearful phone calls, from our companion diocese, giving mutual thanks for each other's prayers. The Coming of the Kingdom is heard in the streets of Port-au-Prince, amidst the rubble and the screams, where people are singing praises to their God, as they proclaim "Alleluia!" and "Emmanuel!" because they *know* God has not forgotten. The Coming of the Kingdom is observed in the basement of *this* church where volunteers come to care for people in need, and find people in need caring right back for each of them.

God invites us into collaboration in announcing God's Kingdom. God invites us to reach out across the ocean and partner with people we have never met. God calls us to listen to the needs of the world *with God's ears*, and to respond with God's hands and God's feet. God invites us to carve up our churches and use them to feed the hungry, with both food for our stomachs, and sacrament for our souls.

God calls us to proclaim both the cornerstone of the Kingdom, and the foundation of our life in Christ, that *salvation* is inextricable bound in each another – and that *I am, only because we are!*

Thanks be to God.