



Thy Kingdom Come: The Promise of Christian Hope

Theology Statement

Trying to figure out whether or not there is any greater meaning to life has been a human preoccupation for millennia. While some people today turn to consumerism or self-improvement programs, many others struggle simply to find shelter for their families and put food on the table. The gross disparities and injustices of the world cast our search for meaning into bold relief.

Christian faith compels us to conduct this search in the context of community and with sustained, genuine conversation. The meaning of life cannot be discerned on our own or in isolation from the realities of the world in which we live. Jesus' disciples knew this and when they asked him how they ought to pray, Jesus responded by telling them to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Pray, he said, that the Kingdom comes (Luke 11:1–4).

Anglican Christians have understood the Kingdom of Heaven—or Reign of God—as much more than the institutional Church. In the Gospels, Jesus frequently used the images of banquet or feast to describe the Kingdom—a feast of joy and peace to which everyone is welcome. (Matthew 22:1–10, Luke 14:7–14, and Luke 15:11–32 provide some examples.) For this reason, Anglicans have devoted a great deal of energy to liturgy, and to the Eucharist in particular. At the Eucharistic table we catch a glimpse and have a taste of that banquet still to come. With the energy of this weekly vision we are sent out into the world as the Body of Christ to give tangible expression to the coming Kingdom.

The Episcopal Church welcomes you, not only to sit in a pew or to write a check, but as a partner in building what Jesus called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. (Mark 4 and Matthew 13 provide several examples of this.) This partnership is what we mean by Christian community. Despite our most admirable intent of bringing about the reign of God, any church offers at best only an imperfect glimpse of the Kingdom; no human institution is perfect. Despite its limitations, the Episcopal Church offers a way to renew your hope and energize your vision of the kind of life God intends for all people. After all, God is the one who extends this invitation—the God who created you, the God who embraced your humanity in Jesus, the God who calls out to you in the Spirit.

God's purpose from the very beginning of creation has been that all people come to experience the fullness of communion with God and one another. Jesus himself prayed in John's Gospel that we all might be one, just as he and the Creator are one (John 17:11).

This, surely, is what we Episcopalians understand to be the meaning of life.

Take-Home Materials for Session Seven

The work of the Gospel calls us to go out into the world, to take the learning, prayer, and spirit of the community to the people of God who are not gathered in our community. This week, as you reflect on your experience, here are some resources to focus your meditation, prayer, and study. You may have time to do all of these things during your week. You may only have time for some of the suggestions. Whatever you do, please keep the members of your small group in your thoughts as you carry out your work.

Meditation

“Eternal Life,” from *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC* by Frederick Buechner; Harper, San Francisco, 1993

When you are with somebody you love, you have little if any sense of the passage of time, and you also have, in the fullest sense of the phrase, “a *good* time.”

When you are with God, you have something like the same experience. The biblical term for the experience is Eternal Life. Another is Heaven.

What does it mean to be “with God?” It doesn’t mean you have to be thinking about being with God, or feeling religious, or sitting in church, or saying your prayers, though it might mean any or all of these. It doesn’t even mean you have to believe in God.

To say that a person is “with it” is slang for saying that whether he’s playing an electric guitar or just watching the clouds roll by, he’s so caught up in what he’s doing and so totally himself while he’s doing it that there’s none of him left over to be doing anything else with in the back of his head or out of the corner of his eye. It’s slang for saying that the temperature where he is is about 40 degrees hotter than the temperature where he is not, and that if he were a flag and they ran him up the mast, we’d all have to salute whether we liked it or not. And the chances are we’d like it.

If the It you’re with when you’re really “with it” isn’t God, it’s enough like him to be his brother.

This side of Paradise, people are with God in such a remote and spotty way that their experience of Eternal Life is at best like the experience you get of a place approaching it at night in a fast train. Even the saints see only an occasional light go whipping by, hear only a sound or two over the clatter of the rails. The rest of us aren’t usually awake enough to see as much as that, or we’re mumbling over our nightcaps in the club car.

But the day will break and the train will pull into the station, and the ones who have managed to stay with it will finally alight.

We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins.

St. Paul uses the phrase Eternal Life to describe the end and goal of the process of salvation. Elsewhere he writes the same thing in a remarkable sentence where he says that the whole purpose of God’s slogging around through the muck of history and our own individual histories is somehow to prod us, jolly us, worry us, cajole us, and if need be bludgeon us into reaching “mature manhood...the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13)

In other words to live Eternal Life in the full and final sense is to be with God as Christ is with him, and with each other as Christ is with us.

Prayer for the Week

A Song of Faith, *Enriching our Worship*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by divine mercy we have a new birth into a living hope;
Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
we have an inheritance that is imperishable in heaven.
The ransom that was paid to free us
was not paid in silver or gold,
But in the precious blood of Christ,
the Lamb without spot or stain.
God raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory
so that we might have faith and hope in God.

Scripture for the Week

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. **I Peter 3:13-16** New Revised Standard Version

Journaling

Journaling is a good way for adults to pay attention to their faith lives. You are encouraged to journal so that you can consider the questions that develop during our time together. Like with other prayer disciplines, it often helps to pick a time to write in your journal each day, setting it aside in some way. The question to think about as you write this week appears below.

Reflection for the Week

Another parable he put before them, saying, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” **Matthew 17:31-32** New Revised Standard Version

As you write and reflect this week on the Kingdom of God and the Christian Hope, develop a metaphor, or metaphors that describe the Reign of God as you see it. Take a stab at writing your own parable, beginning with the words: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”