

"WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD LIKE?"

INTRODUCTION

A bumper sticker on the back of a car caught my eye the other day. It read: "God, Guns and Guts Made Us Free."

There's something very American about that. John Wayne could have said it. It's the type of thing that Woody Hayes might have posted on the wall of the locker room. General Patton would have called it good and pronounced "Amen" to it. "God, Guns and Guts Made Us Free."

There's nothing subtle in that. Power is all that counts - power with a weapon in its hand and a captive God to bless us. Force is the language of achievement. Line the enemy up and hit him a good lick. "God, Guns, Guts".

DEVELOPMENT

Long ago Jesus of Nazareth asked:

"What is the Kingdom of God like? It is like a grain of mustard seed when planted, but grows up to be the biggest of all shrubs! It is like a piece of leaven that a woman uses in her baking to make the bread stand up."

(Luke 13: 18 - 21)

Is it any wonder then that "Kingdom talk" has never swept the world?

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God more than any other subject. Yes, more than prayer, more than love, more than judgment, more than mercy, more than forgiveness. For a definition I would suggest that the Kingdom of God - or the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew calls it - is the Lordship of God, established in this world in Jesus Christ. The Kingdom equals Christ.

It's a broad category; so broad, in fact, that one could preach on almost any subject with the Kingdom as the theme. It's important when speaking of the Kingdom to do some narrowing down. And the one aspect of the Kingdom that concerns us this morning is how it operates in history. How does the Kingdom of God proceed? How does it make its way in the world? What is its style and what's it like? Two parables provide us with a hint.

MUSTARD SEED / LEAVEN

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Now the mustard seed stood proverbially in Israel for the smallest of all particles. The mustard seed was tinier than the seed of wheat or barley or oats. Jesus used it as a symbol of smallness when he said:

"If you had faith the size of a grain of mustard seed (that small!), you could say to a mountain, 'Begone' and it would be removed."

The end really cannot be envisioned from the beginning. From such a tiny start and small beginning a bush can grow that will rise eight to twelve feet in height. Birds of the air can cavort in its branches.

The Kingdom of God, also, is like leaven. Leaven looks quite inconsequential in the baking process. Yet, a tiny pinch of leaven tossed into a mass of dough many times its size, can say to that dough, "Rise up" - and it will!

Now these parables are apt to be a disappointment for all who are looking for

instant answers to difficult and stubborn questions. The parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven are a long, long way from the God, Guns and Guts way of solving problems.

In the days of His flesh, let it be remembered, Jesus disappointed the Zealots, those passionate patriots who wanted quick, right-away answers. No fooling around. Out with Rome. Liberty for Israel. Now.

And what shall we say for those two disciples who were known affectionately as the "Sons of Thunder"? They had an incurable inclination for showdowns. Jesus one time went into a Samaritan village and the people did not receive Him. James and John said, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" But Jesus turned to them and rebuked them. (Luke 9: 54)

And Judas, according to one theory, was so anxious to provoke Jesus to action that he betrayed Him. But Matthew knew what He was doing when he summarized the ministry of Jesus by borrowing from Second Isaiah:

"He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets; He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick till He brings justice to victory; and in His name will the Gentiles hope". (Matthew 12: 19 - 21)

GROWTH AND PERMEATION / KINGDOM METHODS

meation are the methods of the Kingdom. No instant answers that rely on the "Guns and Guts" mentality.

The mustard seed and the leaven confirm the truth that growth and per-

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Growth and permeation. Is there anything less spectacular than watching grass grow. To me, it's about as interesting as watching paint dry, or a glacier move. But the Kingdom will not be rushed by your program or mine or anyone else's. It has a timing of its own.

God works through process. This is the welcome note sounded by Process theologians under the inspiration of Alfred North Whitehead who wrote:

"There is in the Galilean origin of Christianity yet another suggestion which does not fit well with any of the three main strands of thought concerning God. It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover.

It dwells upon the tender elements of the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a Kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to morals. It does not look to the future; for it finds its own reward in the immediate present."

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The Kingdom of God is like leaven.

DEEPLY REASSURING

These parables, however disappointing they may be to us initially, in their own quiet way are deeply reassuring.

It is God's Kingdom. He is invincibly and irreversibly at work in this world. Small beginnings (can anything good come out of Nazareth?) will issue in

spectacular results. See that bush? Know how it started? See that loaf? Know what made it rise. There is a divine influence mysteriously and progressively extending itself in human society. Life is being prodded gently in the direction of the values of Him who was crucified. Ever since Jesus came and lived among us, tendencies assert themselves in history under His influence.

"He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away".

(Luke 1: 51, 52)

Life has these tendencies. This is the way history runs.

THE OTHER SIDE Ah, but some of you may feel like arguing with me. You're saying, "It's not happening that way...at least as far as I can see. From where I sit....from what I read....from what I view...nothing like that at all is going on". Let me defend myself and ask you, "And how do you know?"

How sad it is in the Church today to see the discouragement of people who once gave it a good try. They gave it their best shot, desperately wanting to relate Christ to history and nothing apparently happened. What was it for you? Civil rights? I sat down with a suburban pastor a while ago who had not involved himself in the struggle. He remarked, "You know the Church was into the civil rights movements back there in the 60's...but not too much came of it." I said, "Oh". How does he know? What was it for you? Exposing evil in high places? Housing? Better schools for all? A more humane national budget? Prison reform? The war on poverty?

Some ground must be taken and taken again. Nothing stays won. We know that. We were never told that it would be simple, and we dare not underestimate the opposition.

And the Church - mustard seed, leaven - does it look like either? The Church these days, as far as the press is concerned, is neither reported nor refuted, just ignored. And sometimes we have to whistle in the night to be sure that we still matter. We like the numbers game when we have the numbers. If we don't have the numbers then we become "Spiritual" and say that they don't count anyway.

Of all the writers in the New Testament, the one who was most obsessed with numbers was Luke. He was quick to report that on the Day of Pentecost "there were three thousand added". It's almost as if he wanted to give those mustard seed people a little sense of growth and achievement. And when Pentecost was over he said, "The Lord added daily to the Church, such as should be saved."

Later on he wrote,

"So the Church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied".

Luke had a very good sense of numbers. He would have made a good press secretary for a traveling evangelist!

But Luke also remembered that the Church would always be, vis-a-vis the world, like a little flock. He recorded that word of Jesus, "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom".

I learned on Tuesday evening at the Annual Meeting of RIAL (Religion In American Life) that there are 80 million people in Church of Synagogue every weekend in America. I sat up a little taller on learning that. Why that's more people gathering voluntarily on a regular basis than gather voluntarily on a regular basis for anything else. 80 million! The sad side is that we don't seem to make an impression in proportion to our numbers.

SCRIPTURES TALK OF INTENSIVE GROWTH

The Scriptures when they talk of growth, talk of intensive growth as well as extensive. Growing in faith. Growing in love. Growing in grace. Growing in righteousness. How do you measure? How do we know but what ten people in this congregation this past week grew substantially in Jesus Christ.

The plain truth is that we are not in any position to know how goes the Kingdom. It would be interesting if the news each night on television could include a moral stock exchange report based on the soundings of a "spiritual" computer. The announcer might say:

"Well, friends, kindness was up 1/8 today in America, but greed was up 2 1/4. Lust was down 1/2 point today. Justice showed no change. Patience reached a new high - closing at 72. Love had a narrow gain to 49 1/2."

We simply do not know. We're forced back on the wisdom of Habakkuk who said:

"For still the vision awaits its time. It hastens to the end; it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come. It will not delay."

That Biblical word reminded me of something I read in Wednesday's paper. It was in Red Smith's column in the Times. Entitled, Of God, Baseball and Dodger Blue, it had some good quotes from Tommy Lasorda, manager of the Dodgers.

"God's delays do not mean God's denials". "We'll get our turn".

WHERE WE BUY IN TO IT

I believe we will. The mustard seed. Leaven. We need to bring this down to where you and I can buy into it. The major clue to the Kingdom in the Bible is that the Kingdom equals Christ. The Kingdom equals Christ. The Kingdom is "Christ-like" and in that Kingdom there is no "un-Christ-likeness" at all!

When the people of the day of Jesus heard these parables for the first time, the occasion became for them a "language event". They saw their lives in a new way. They discovered a relationship to history. They found themselves with new connections and new possibilities. And it can be so for us.

There are, I suppose, but three ways that one can live. One can say that nothing is going on. There is no kingdom. There's no purpose. All notions of direction and progress are human constructs. Such people live, in Lewis Mumford's words, "With the empty inconsecutiveness of a present that is divorced from a past and a future." There is no kingdom at all. There is only me.

Good

A second group says, "Yes, there is a Kingdom, and it's MY kingdom, and I will ask (or use) God to help me achieve it."

The third group seeks first the Kingdom of God, and finds all other things added.

The first says, MY will be done. The second says, MY will be done - with God's help. The third group says, THY will be done, O God, THY Kingdom come.

This is where we buy into it. In which group do you find yourself? "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God" said Jesus. "And all these things shall be added unto you".

PRAYER "Lord, where we want too much to happen too quickly, temper our passion with greater patience. And where we have given up believing that history has a destination, overcome our doubts with a vision of the Kingdom that Jesus taught and was. We pray in His ever-blessed name. Amen

Red Smith

Of God, Baseball And Dodger Blue

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Tommy Lasorda was breathing. It follows as the night the day that he was talking — about God, about the Dodgers, about his mother and father and four brothers. About the Dodgers, about loyalty, about jogging. "You know what jogging's done for America? Now when a jogger drops dead on the road, he's in shape. Guy at the wake says, 'He looks good.' 'He oughta,' the widows says, 'he ran three miles every morning.'" Everybody knows about Tommy Lasorda, who bleeds Dodger blue, who puts his trust in the Great Dodger in the Sky. This is his 30th year in the Dodger organization, his third spring as manager. His predecessor, Walter Alston, managed the team for 23 years, always on one-year contracts because Walter O'Malley, the Great Dodger in Los Angeles, doesn't believe in multiyear contracts. "Not many know it," Lasorda said, "but I got a multicontract — multimonths."

Sports
of
The Times

"When I was appointed manager for 1977," he said, "I was so excited I couldn't see. We won the pennant and last spring I was more excited than the first year. We won the pennant again. This spring I'm more excited about this team than I ever was before.

"I'll tell you something, there are three kinds of ball-players. One kind makes things happen. Another watches things happen. The third wonders what happened. The guys on this club — "If you will pardon the writer's intrusion here, I'm not going to tell you which kind the Dodgers are. I'm going to let you guess. Smith writes:

After all that excitement and all that success, it must have been disheartening to lose the World Series to the Yankees both years.

"It was a disappointment, yes. But like I told my players, there's 24 other clubs would have loved to be in our place. I told 'em I was proud of them winning two pennants in a row against great clubs like the Reds and Phillies and Pirates and Giants, great clubs.

"You know, if God delays, it doesn't mean God denies. We'll get our turn."

Everybody Is Better

In spring training, all clubs show striking improvement over last year, even the Mets and Braves and Seattle and Toronto. So exactly where and how have the Dodgers improved since 1978?

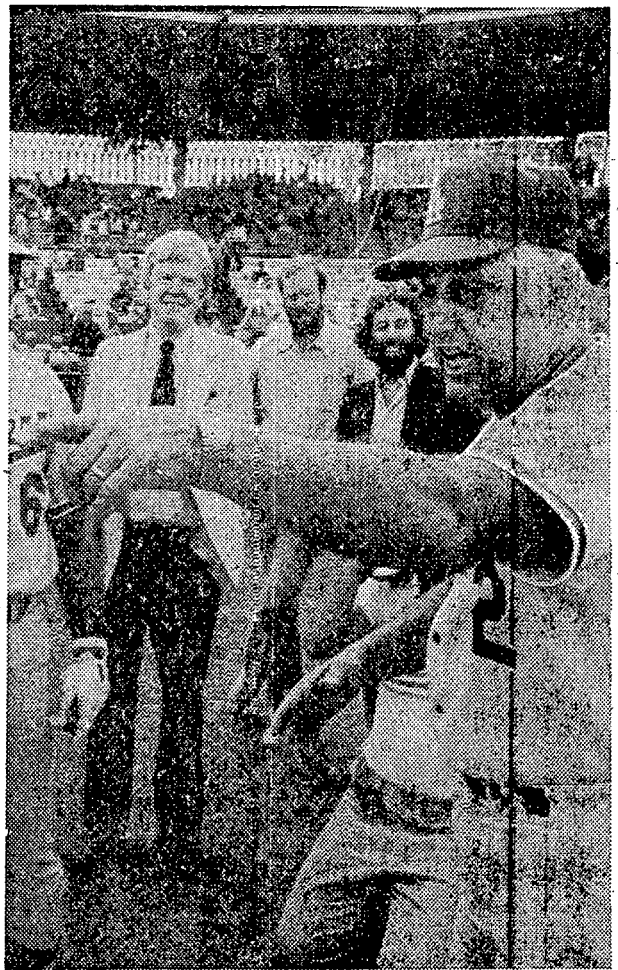
"People thought we'd be hurt," Lasorda said, "because we lost Tommy John and Lee Lacy and Bill North and Jerry Grote, but Al here has replaced them." Al Campanis, the Dodgers vice president for personnel, was listening.

"Losing Tommy John," the manager said, "was like losing a member of my family. He's a great pitcher, a great team man, a great guy. Now we've got Andy Messersmith and he's been looking very good."

"Is there a no-trade clause in his contract?" a visitor asked. This was a joke. It was because the Dodgers rejected his demand for a no-trade clause that Messersmith played out his option with Los Angeles, then won the litigation that has cost the clubs millions in payments to free agents.

"No," Al Campanis said, "he's on a straight two-year contract."

"We got Derrel Thomas, who played out his option with San Diego," Lasorda said. "He can play any place on the infield or in the outfield. Then there is Gary Thomasson, who got in a deal with the Yankees. Thomas is a switch-hitter,



The New York Times/Barton Silverman

Tommy Lasorda lecturing reporters at Fort Lauderdale
"...I got a multicontract — multimonths"

Thomasson is left-handed. Gary can play anywhere in the outfield, filled in for Mickey Rivers in center last year.

"Messersmith has been looking fine and this year we've got Bob Welch from the start of the season."

Two From Eastern Michigan

Welch is the tall young man from Ferndale, Mich., who shared top billing with Reggie Jackson in the most theatrical moment of last October's World Series. He entered the second game in the ninth inning with the Dodgers clinging to a 4-3 lead, and with two out he faced Jackson — the kid who was not quite 22 against the man who owns October. Welch threw a third strike past Reggie for the last out.

"Throws the ball 95 miles an hour," Al Campanis said. "Since he came out of Eastern Michigan College, he's been the guy scouts compare all young pitchers to. There's another pitcher out of Eastern Michigan. Name of Bob Owchinko, with the Padres. Can you imagine a little school like that having two pitchers like those on the same team?"

"So that's where we're improved," Lasorda said. "We're stronger on the bench and with Welch and Messersmith our pitching hasn't lost anything, much as I hated to see Tommy John go.

"Tommy had to make his own decision. Me, I couldn't leave the Dodgers unless they cut the cord. They gave me a chance 30 years ago and when I was managing in Triple-A for them at \$9,000 a guy offered me a three-year contract for \$17,000, \$20,000 and \$25,000. That was a hell of a gang of dollars for a guy making 9,000, but I couldn't go.

"There's four things in my life I've never regretted — believing in God, my feeling for my family, being an American and being with this organization."