

A Community for the King

The relationship between the church, the kingdom and the world

by Jim Punton

KINGDOM OF THE FUTURE

The universe the Creator designed was a cosmos of love, inter-relating, inter-dependent, harmonious and whole; every thing, every structure, every being brought him delight. But evil wrecked creation, bringing disintegration, disunity, decay and death. God's love reached out in mission and his heart devised the means to restore creation to his intention. 'God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only son'. Through death and resurrection of his Son God's grace has provided his way to reclamation and reconstitution of the universe. Every unresponsive thing, structure and person will be eradicated; injustice, greed, disease, hunger - all that makes for death and finally death itself will be destroyed. Then the new creation, in 'new heavens and new earth', will manifest freely the KINGDOM OF GOD (Rev. 21. 1-5; Is. 65. 17; Rom. 8. 21; Is. 11. 6-9). The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of the future. Through the Spirit of God we have now the presence of the future and the means of experiencing the realities of the Kingdom for whose coming we pray.

THE MESSIAH AND THE KINGDOM

In the Old Testament God is the King who yet shall become King. The vision with the promised Messiah moves towards the eschatological Kingdom. But the eschaton is always within history and the Kingdom is on a restored earth. In the New Testament we find it God's purpose 'to sum up all things in the Messiah, things in the heavens and things in the earth' (Eph. 1.1 a). 'For it was the Father's good pleasure ... through him to reconcile all things to himself. ... through the blood of his cross' (Col. 1.20 cf. 2 Cor. 5.19; 1 Cor. 15.24-28).

'God messiahed Jesus of Nazareth in the holy Spirit and in power' (Acts 10.38; 4.27). In the words at his baptism there is a reference to Ps. 2.7 where God's Son, i.e. his Messiah, is promised to the nations as a heritage (also Heb. 1.5). A more direct parallel is 'Behold my Servant... my Chosen in whom my being is delighted. I have put my Spirit upon him; he

will bring justice to the nations.' (Is. 42; 1 -4). Jesus saw his messiahship in terms of the Suffering Servant and fought off temptations to bypass suffering servanthood and death. In Nazareth he announced: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has messiahed me to bring good news to the oppressed'. (Is. 61; Luke 4. 18-19). God in these last days has spoken to us by his Son whom he has appointed heir of all things .. of the Son he says 'Your throne O God is for ever and ever; the sceptre of justice is the sceptre of your Kingdom. You have loved justice ... therefore God, your God, has messiahed you'.

Three Old Testament functions could carry messiahship; kings, prophets and priests. The Messiah, bearing the Kingdom, would be all three. This had marked David and also the servant. So Jesus in himself would be:

- a) The Suffering Servant as king, living out the kingdom values and relationships, demonstrating the authority of his relation to his Father.
- b) The Suffering Servant as prophet, representing God to the cosmos, demonstrating his heart and his will, interpreting the world and heralding the Kingdom.
- c) The Suffering Servant as priest, representing the cosmos of God, identifying with the broken and hurting ones, interceding for them, suffering for them, celebrating on their behalf.

The Messiah came 'for the very purpose of undoing the deeds of the devil' (1 Jn 3.8). His messianic work was co-extensive with evil. He had rejected 'the kingdom of the world and their glory' (Mt. 4.8) and set himself towards the time when 'the kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah' (Rev. 11.15), by way of suffering servanthood and resurrection. The Messiah was 'not derived from this world' (In. 8.23) and his 'kingdom is not derived from this world' (In. 18.36). But, though the source of his Kingdom is not this world, this world is certainly the context for it. The Messiah set about to establish God's coming new order, demonstrating with the signs he did that the prophecies of the new age were being enacted among them. The 'good news of the Kingdom' was heralded by deed, by word and by being.

The Kingdom demanded community and Messiah chose twelve to represent the remnant of Israel, the foundation of the New .. With them he set about creating the people of God as a community where the Kingdom was being experienced.

As Messiah he was in direct collision with the world's system and values. Jesus is the King who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many; his was to suffer rather than inflict suffering; to put others before self; to forgive and love enemies; to affirm the marginalized; to repudiate domination and oppression; to set aside greed and possession, to share and co-operate; to give respect and regard to the outcast and poor; to champion women and children; and to expose the idolatries of success, status, security, power. He challenged custom, tradition, law and institution; he attacked the economic power of the temple, calling its aristocratic leaders 'terrorists'; he identified Herod as 'that fox' and was non-co-operative with the Roman legal system; he embraced untouchable lepers and accepted the love of prostitutes; he identified as 'hypocrites' the religious moralists who "lock the door to the Kingdom in people's faces" (Mt. 23.13); he called differentiated wealth "mammon derived from injustice", and warned that trust in armaments recoils on the user. There was no doubt what the social stance of the Messiah was.

Discipleship meant sharing this stance and living it out. But the struggle at discipleship was with a kingdom community that served as a base for resisting the seduction of "the present evil age", and made it possible to live in the world without being of it. The hills and valleys of inequality were dealt with, hills being humbled and valleys being raised, a highway for the Lord. The powerful who wanted to identify with the Messiah found they had to identify with the powerless and oppressed, in a solidarity that meant disengagement from former securities. The poor had to be open to love for enemies, to forgiveness, to reconciliation. And all members of this new social reality had to be prepared for the suffering and persecution that would be meted out by the old system under threat from the new.

The age to come had been brought forward into the present age to be experienced now. Healings promised wholeness and all the Messiah's miracles showed the redeeming of creation from the destructive forces of illness, demon-possession and death. Such acts demonstrated the defeat of the devil.

THE MESSIANIC PEOPLE AND THE KINGDOM

Jesus was "messiahed in the Spirit." But the awesome fact is that God had "messiahed us and put his seal upon us and given us the guaranteeing pledge of the Spirit" (1 Cor.

1.21). From the holy One, you have a messiah-ing ... and the messiah-ing which you received from him remains" (1 Jn. 1.20.27). We are a messiahed people. Trusting him, we "have all been baptised in one Spirit into one body" (1 Cor. 12.13). "Now you are the body of the Messiah and individually members" (1 Cor. 12.27; 16.15). We can also say that "being many, we are one body in the Messiah" (Rom. 12.5; 2 Cor. 5.17; Rom. 8.1; Gal. 5.26). And 'in the messiah' we share the functions of his messiahship:

- a) the suffering servant, royal people.
- b) the suffering servant, prophetic people.
- c) the suffering servant, priestly people.

Baptism is our ordination to messianic peoplehood. We who "have been baptised into the Messiah have put on the Messiah" (Gal. 5.27). "All of us who have been baptised into the Messiah Jesus, have been baptised into his death. We are buried therefore with him ... so that as the Messiah was raised ... by the glory of the Father we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6.3.4.). It includes us in his obedience, involves us in his death for the whole creation and in his rising as the first fruits of the new creation. Baptism is a kingdom event, sharing now in eschatological renewal. It is ordination to participation in the royal, prophetic and priestly work of the Messiah.

'Resident aliens'

The Messiah, in creating a new people, made a new covenant in his death. The new Israel is a "distinctive nation" (1 Pet. 2.9) with all the dimensions of a nation's life. Every bit as much as in the Old Testament it is a socio-political entity. The difference is that it is a nation in dispersion among the nations of the world. Conversion to the Messiah means we become 'resident aliens' in the nations to which we have belonged. The people of God is not international. It is one nation scattered. The nation of the New Israel must be a nation. It must allow other nations whatever cultus they choose. But the New Israel must not abandon its own Messianic nationhood and settle for being cultus to other nations. This was the tragedy of the deal done with Constantine. Nor must it seek like Old Israel to escape its dispersion and withdraw to itself. This is the tragedy of Zionism. It is to be separate from idolatry (2 Cor. 6.17) Let us live for the Messiah where we are, doing all we can to share God's love in our host nations; but let's experience worldwide the solidarity of the "body of the Messiah" that we might again be a "light to the nations".

God's resources "for building up the body of the Messiah until we all attain to the measure of the stature of the fulness of the Messiah" (Eph. 4.13) are 'grace-gifts' or 'charismata.' As Jesus was 'messiahed in the holy Spirit' and as his people are, it is only through the Spirit that it is possible to be the "body of the Messiah". There is one body and one Spirit... But to each one of us grace has been given as the Messiah apportioned it (Eph. 4.4). "Each one must use whatever grace-gift s/he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." (1 Pet. 4.10). The gifts are necessary. And they are given to enable us to be the 'body of the Messiah' to the world. The charismatic betrays the messiah if it is diverted from mission. It is so that we may be God's agents of the Kingdom that we are enriched. Can God look on us and say "Behold my servant people ... my chosen ... I have put my Spirit upon them; they will bring justice to the nations" (Is. 42.1)?

"We are heirs of God and fellow heirs of the Messiah if we share his suffering now" (Rom. 8.17). The messianic people are committed to suffering servanthood as our pattern of incarnating the gospel of the Kingdom. The Messiah so lived the life of God's kingdom that the world put a cross on his back. Do we stand where he stands? Embrace what he embraces? Confront what he confronts? If we are not outraged by what outrages him, do we share his love? If we're not in solidarity with the victims of injustice will we come to 'know the Messiah and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings' (Phil. 3.8, 10-11). Will we be prepared to "complete what is lacking in the sufferings of the Messiah for the sake of his body" (Col. 1.24)? To take up our cross daily is so to take the stance of Jesus that vested interests demand an end to us.

We are called to "have the mind among yourselves which you have in the Messiah Jesus, who ... humbled himself and became obedient unto death" (Phi I. 2.5). Can we say with the early community, "We have the mind of the Messiah" (1 Cor. 2.16)? Is there a Kingdom way through contemporary predicaments? How do we identify the 'messianic mind'? Dare we take seriously the social ethics he gave on the Mount? How much we need the Messiah's teaching on the Kingdom. How elusive to our thinking are his parables. How great to have had the teaching he gave when he "spoke of the Kingdom of God" (Acts 1.3). Is it possible in the Lord to be "firmly joined in unity of mind and thought" (1 Col. 1.10)? And is true orthodoxy possible without orthopraxis? (Jn. 7.17).

Thus far we have dealt with the people of God without using its commonest metaphor. Some 115 times ecclesia is used in the New Testament. It carries over the Old Testament

concept of assembly. In Greek it was a political word, describing the regular meeting of free citizens to make laws, administer justice, see to educational, medical, commercial and governmental matters. Before the "body of the Messiah" got reduced to primarily cultic activity, there would have been a great deal of working out how to be a Kingdom community and represent the Messiah in the day-to-day as neighbours, workers, citizens, colleagues etc., how to fulfil the messianic function both in society and with one another.

The Messiah is head/source of the ecclesia and he is Saviour of the body" (Eph. 5.23). 'God gave him as head/source to the ecclesia which is his body' (Eph. 1.22,23). The first recorded use of 'catholic church' says: 'Wherever Jesus the Messiah is, there is the catholic church (Ignatius). Be it only two or three being the body of the Messiah to others, that is the church (Mt. 18.20). No ecclesia is said in the New Testament to be part of the body of the Messiah: nor to be a body of the Messiah alongside others. Each is the body of the Messiah wherever it is.

Living the future now

The 'marks' of being a royal, prophetic and priestly people suggest a dynamic and organic understanding. Are they also more true to Jesus and the early church? We must look briefly at what it means for the church to be messianic living the life of the future kingdom now.

a) One of the messianic functions is to be a royal people. Primarily it means so being and living that society can identify the Messiah in his body and know what the Kingdom is like. It is here that values and relationships are worked through. The greatest is the least; hierarchy is out; the child and the child-like are prized. "You are not to be called 'Rabi' for you have only one Master, and you are all brothers ... nor are you to be called 'Teacher', for you have one Teacher, the Messiah" (Mt. 23.8.10). Pretentious titles among us are challenged by kingdom values. Barriers of age, sex, culture, race are broken down. Enemies are loved and prayed for. There is solidarity with the helpless, the inadequate, the exploited, the impaired, the disabled, the lonely. There is a real sharing of homes, resources, gifts and lives which is koinonia. Class and privilege are abolished. The authority of the Messiah is acknowledged and the people claim his authority to do Kingdom things. He has charged us for example: "Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Cast out demons" (Mt. 10.8). What for our time would he have us do? "After all, we are reigning now with the Messiah. "God raised us up with him and made us sit with him in the heavenlies" (Eph. 2.5,6; 1.3; Col. 2.9-15). It is "through the ecclesia" that he means his

"Multi-coloured wisdom" to be demonstrated to the principalities and powers (Eph. 3.10). The old collect 'Quem servire, regnare est' (usually translated 'Whom to serve is perfect freedom') actually says 'Whom to serve is to reign'.

b) Another function is prophetic. Through his community God would speak clearly to society. It includes the revealing of the nature of God, his attitudes, his love, his judgment, his promised kingdom. It demands a deep identification and solidarity with people, a close experience with what's happening. It needs commitment to others and deep caring so that words of judgment when they come are said with tears. It needs God's courage to live differently and to face the ongoing need for repentance in new areas. It involves collision with vested interests and institutions. It demands discernment to expose the demonic, to get deeper than prejudice and self interest, to recognise and name the enemies of the kingdom, to chase injustices to source and see how to have them eliminated, to perform symbolic action, to show unfolding consequences, and the link, for example, between the arms race and the widening gulf between rich and poor, to renounce old order power and force and paternalism, to raise levels of awareness and mobilize the powerless to take responsibility for change, to use God's Word at every point, to speak from the midst of human life on personal, social and political conditions that thwart God's kingdom purposes of love and wholeness.

Here we affirm witness and evangelism (though these belong to every function). The prophetic is not often seen as evangelism but it can be powerfully so. Refusing to obey Hitler's racial laws was an act of evangelisation. To defy the racial segregation in South Africa, be it in political or professional life inevitably leads to proclaiming the Lordship of Christ and his love for all' (J. Hammer). Above all we are to "proclaim the wonderful deeds of him who brought us out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2.9).

c) The third function is the priestly. The Messiah has 'freed us in his blood and made us priests to God' (Rev. 1.6; 5.10), a distinctive priesthood to offer sacrifices through the Messiah (1 Pet. 2.4,5). In the Messiah was fulfilled the words of God. 'You shall be to me a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19.6). 'You shall be called the priests of the Lord ... servants of our God' (Is. 61.6). Linked to the Father in the high priest, all who are 'in the Messiah' are priests, the 'priesthood of all believers'. But what does this mean? The priest is a go-between, a linking-person. We are not each a priest on his own behalf. We are not each a priest on behalf of brother or sister priests. We are together a priesthood on behalf

of those who are not yet priests, to those not yet 'in the Messiah'. The 'body of the Messiah' is a priesthood to the world, to creation.

The priesthood points beyond itself to God; directs to the source of grace and reconciliation and healing. We are privileged to be their representatives 'in the Messiah' before God. This demands an identification with non-Christians or solidarity with them, an agonising with them and a rejoicing with them. 'In the Messiah' the priesthood is called to be the scapegoat, to absorb hostility, bewilderment, helplessness and fear. We represent the victims of oppression, both oppressed and oppressing. We plead the wholeness of the broken and those responsible for the broken-ness. We carry to God the guilt of those who exploit, and the pain of the exploited. And we may suffer the anger of those who won't be released from oppressing, won't share power, won't free others from dependency on them.

The Old Israel was priest to the surrounding nations (Ex. 19.6) so must we be. We are one nation dispersed worldwide. It is to the other nations that we are a nation of priests. We are to identify with the world, agonising, suffering, giving time and self, weeping and laughing for it, celebrating, bringing it before God in prayer. Paul says, 'I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be offered for all people' (1 Tim. 2.1). As God's priesthood on the world's behalf we celebrate its every experience of shalom, we plead for it in every area where God's wholeness is thwarted and denied. The prayers of God's people must encompass the structural, the industrial, the socio-political as well as the personal, till his will is done on earth.

Everywhere in the Bible 'priestly' language is used of the 'everyday'. For example, 'liturgy' (leitourgia) is used of sharing the gospel, of shared life, of shared finances; it is not limited to cultic activity round an altar. Originally "leitourgia" meant "action for the people" activity by those with the resources done to benefit those without. The resources we have as God's priesthood are to be made available to those outside. Then there's the use of sacrificial terms where "we are a sweet savour of the Messiah to God" (2 Cor. 2.15) and may be "poured as a libation" (Phil 2.17) Our servanthood is priesthood. A major word for 'worship' must also be translated 'service' because we have created a dichotomy; so Paul urges us "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice ... which is the service (or worship) befitting the Word" (Rom. 12,1). So our priesthood is in the offering of our lives in servanthood and service. It is in our social ethics that the worship is evidenced. "Pure religion ... is to visit the fatherless and widows in their oppression". (Jas. 1.27).

Indeed God's prophets make it abundantly clear that God will not accept as worship any celebration, hymns or prayers that came from a people complicit in oppression and injustice. So long as our hands are covered with the blood of exploitation, so long as we thrive at the expense of others, so long as we acquiesce in the inequality, poverty and powerlessness of others anywhere in God's world, we nullify our priesthood and God will have no delight in our prayers (Is. 1.15, Hos. 6.6, Amos 5.21). For the cultic to be accepted by God we must first be committed to God's social justice.

Let us seek before God the fulness of the Spirit by whom we are messiahed, that the Messiah may be true Priest through an obedient and trusting priesthood.

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