

In the summer of 1985, a severe drought lowered the water level in the Sea of Galilee exposing land that had been under water for centuries. In the shallow waters, two brothers discovered a fishing boat that later was dated to about the time of Christ. The wood had developed the consistency of wet cardboard. The restoration took ten years of painstaking work by Hebrew University Department of Archaeology. The size of the boat, 27' x 7.5', was about what one would imagine in the stories of the Gospels. It had a mast as well as oars and appeared to be a typical fishing boat of the era.

In *God and Empire* John Dominic Crossan tells about the discovery. The boat contained seven different types of timber scraped together in bits and pieces taken from other boats. In used car nomenclature, this was not just a "preowned" boat; it was assembled from parts taken from the local wrecking yard. It was not even a restored wreck; it was a jigsaw puzzle assembled from wrecks. When it was no longer seaworthy, every iron nail was removed along with all reusable parts, and it was allowed to sink offshore intended to disappear forever. Crossan was interested in the ancient fishing vessel because of its economic and political story. Archaeologists judged that the condition of the boat reflected a time of extreme economic hardship for the fishermen who had constructed and used the craft.

At the death of Herod the Great, Caesar Augustus divided his kingdom among three of his sons. Archelaus was given half. Antipas and Philip each received a quarter. Antipas had inherited both his father's ambition and treachery along with the area around the Sea of Galilee. He desperately wanted the throne and the title "King of the Jews," and the only way to satisfy his ambition was to impress Rome with the provision of significant revenues. Farmers had already been taxed to the limit, so Antipas turned to the Sea of Galilee and the fishing industry. The fishing vessel discovered in 1985 helps to make Crossan's case: Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God as a direct challenge to the kingdom of Caesar breaking the backs of the peasants. Crossan notes that Jesus hung out by the Sea of Galilee. He called fishermen to be his companions, and the Gospels are loaded with fish stories. At the Sea of Galilee, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, a community of justice and peace especially attractive to the poor and the oppressed. Perhaps the crucifixion of Jesus as a political troublemaker makes sense.

The Kingdom is both political and religious. *Kingdom* is a political term, and *God's* about as religious as you can get. Why did Jesus teach us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as in heaven?" Crossan affirms that it is about doing the will of God down here on earth, but he goes on to say that it is what the world would look like if God sat on Caesar's throne or lived in the palace of Antipas. As Jesus preached, the kingdom is "100 per cent political and 100 per cent religious." (Crossan, p. 117)

No kingdom is particularly appealing in democratic cultures. Even the symbolic monarchy in England appears to be an archaic remnant of an era that deserves to pass into the cemetery of ancient history. The French Revolution followed two decades after the American Revolution with a similar cry for freedom from an oppressive monarchy. However, the French replaced one monarch with another. My history professor at Baylor, Ralph Lynn, said that if we ever had a president, who, like Napoleon, cut taxes in half and doubled public service, we would crown him king and pray for many sons. But we also must remember the Waterloo to which Napoleon led his people. If we have learned anything from the past two centuries of experimental democracy, we know that the system of monarchical government is inherently flawed. "Benevolent dictatorship" is an oxymoron. The proclamation of a kingdom of God was attractive to the first century in ways that much of the modern Western world finds irrelevant. Theologians today prefer to speak of the reign of God largely because the idea of kingdoms have become so repugnant to the free world.

The Gospels reflect the language and politics of the time in which they were written. Crossan notes that the matrix, the context in which Jesus lived out his ministry, was the Roman culture created by Augustus Caesar and executed (probably the most appropriate term) by Herod Antipas in the region around the Sea of Galilee. The message of the kingdom of God had a definitely social, present dimension in the preaching of Jesus.

Two major distortions have stuck in history to shape Christian views of the kingdom of God. On the one side, some have assumed language about the world to come with absolutely no application in the world in which we live. The radical theology reflected in the popular *Left Behind* novels looks for a future kingdom that is not of this world. The hope is to be extracted (the word is "raptured") out of here, and the fear is to be among the people "left behind." The only concern and responsibility for the social-political world is to help accelerate the end, which explains a lot of the uncritical support for modern Israel. On the other extreme, Christendom has assumed that the kingdom of God is totally present in this world within the walls of the established Church. ***Christians have a mission to change the world.*** The kingdom of God is a radical departure from things as they are to things as they ought to be. Our primary task as Christians is peacemaking, but that implies anything but acceptance of the status quo. Our mission is justice, but it is the justice of God.

A century after Walter Rauschenbusch, John Dominic Crossan reaffirmed the social Gospel in the teaching of Jesus. The kingdom of God has a future dimension and a relevant connection to the church, but the primary role is to establish justice in the land. The kingdom of God is a revolutionary establishment of the reign of God in the social structure of humanity that is evident in changed behavior. Rauschenbusch used almost identical language to Crossan: "[The kingdom of God] is something that is here on this earth; that quietly pervades all humanity; that is always working toward the perfect life of God. It cannot be lived out by you alone—you have to live it out with me, and with that brother sitting next to you. We together have to work it out."

Paul got it. In Romans 12, Paul never mentions the theme sermon of Jesus, the kingdom of God, but he picks up the core teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul, like Jesus, was dealing with a Roman political structure, and in the next chapter gets quite specific about ways to make peace with the powers that be. But Christians live by a different standard. The church is the body of Christ on earth, and each of us is a member of

the body. We are not to live in the world like the Romans do, sitting on a high perch looking down on the lower social classes. We do not live to get even fighting our way to the top. To quote Paul and Jesus: "No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.'"

In 1911, Joe Hill a leader in the labor movement known as the Wobblies in an effort to organize migrant workers in lumber and construction camps found himself in direct conflict with the typical message of the church. He produced *The Little Red Songbook* filled with parodies of some of the gospel songs of his day commonly sung by the Salvation Army. He was credited with the phrase, "pie in the sky by and by." In his song "The Preacher and the Slave" *pie in the sky* has been associated with an Ira Sankey hymn, but the lyrics fit "In the Sweet By and By":

Long-haired preachers come out every night,
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right;
But when Asked how 'bout something to eat
They will answer in voices so sweet
You will eat, bye and bye, in that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay, You'll get pie in the sky when you die.

[a modified chorus]

You will eat, bye and bye,
When you've learned how to cook and how to fry;
chop some wood, 'twill do you good
Then you'll eat in the sweet bye and bye

Why did the labor movement take on the church? The church had become the opposite of what Jesus had preached. The Christian enslavement gospel had become a tool in the hands of the new Caesar of the new industrial world just as the same tact had been applied to the slave culture of the antebellum south. The distorted Christian gospel of an other-worldly kingdom put the slaves in their place and delayed the gratification of freedom until heaven.

If we are followers of Jesus, we must keep in sight that the kingdom of God concerns the way we behave in this world, especially the way we act toward the poorest and weakest members of the human family.