

Explain the main aspects of Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God.

Introduction

The Kingdom of God features very prominently in Jesus' teaching with the phrase occurring over 30 times in Luke's gospel. Through Jesus' life, including his teaching, his interactions with others and in the miracles he performed, we can begin to examine his message about the Kingdom of God.

What is the Kingdom of God?

Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God was different to that of his contemporaries. Most Jews were expecting the Kingdom of God to be a physical, political kingdom, led by the Messiah, that would overthrow the occupying Roman forces and restore Israel as a nation under God's command. Jesus' message, however, did not talk of a new nation state, but what Drane defines as "God's way of doing things" in every aspect of life.¹

Jesus started talking about the Kingdom of God right at the start of his ministry which we read in Mark 1:15. This can be interpreted as Jesus "claiming that the Old Testament promises of God were now being fulfilled in his own ministry."² This interpretation is also supported by the message Jesus gave in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30), especially when he declared "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21).

Jesus' doesn't give a clear picture of exactly what the Kingdom of God means, but it is possible that his message about the Kingdom of God can be categorised into four main areas³:

¹ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p112

² Travis, *New Testament Introduction*, p4.3

³ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p128-133 & p148-149

The Kingdom and its ruler

Jesus' life and teaching demonstrate an intimacy with God, especially praying to God as "Abba" (Mark 14:36), and teaching the disciples to pray to "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9).

It is, unsurprising then, that the first main message about the Kingdom of God is that the Kingdom is influenced by the nature and character of God. The parables of the lost coin and the prodigal son (Luke 15:8-32) demonstrate God's "unconditional love for all humanity"⁴, whilst in Matthew 20:1-16 Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to an employer who pays all his staff the same, irrespective of how much they've worked. This portrays God as someone who is "overwhelming generous"⁵. As Drane acknowledges, Jesus' teachings show a God with whom ordinary people "can enjoy a close, personal and loving relationship."⁶

It is important to note that according to Wenham and Walton, despite Jesus' focus on his relationship with God the Father, he didn't teach a "universal fatherhood of all people", but that in the synoptic gospels, Jesus only speaks of God as a father in prayer, or when teaching his disciples.⁷

The Kingdom and individuals

The next part of Jesus' message focuses on the response required to the Kingdom of God from individuals, and Jesus makes this point in the parable of the great supper (Luke 14:15-24). In the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) we see Jesus teaching about how the type of response God looks for from individuals who want to be part of the Kingdom.

Jesus also often comments on the responsibilities of individuals who are part of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-8) teaches that people should "always be ready to account for their actions."⁸

⁴ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p128

⁵ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p129

⁶ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p130

⁷ Wenham and Walton, *Exploring the New Testament*, p168

⁸ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p132

Jesus conveyed his message not only through teaching but also by how he cared for and associated with those whom society had rejected. He healed the lepers (Luke 17:11-19) and a Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10) and it was those on the fringes of society “to whom Jesus’ message and miracles were of most value.”⁹

The Kingdom and the world

Jesus’ message also focuses on the impact of the Kingdom on the wider world. Here, we see Jesus rebuking nature in the same way that he rebukes demons in individuals¹⁰, and parables such as the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-25) teach that individuals are judged on how they have behaved towards others. This is supported by the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) where Jesus gives a “role model” for real life situations.¹¹ Jesus’ command to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31) stresses the importance God places on our relationships with others.

The Kingdom in the future

Drane comments that Judaism often portrayed the future kingdom as a meal¹² and this is reflected through Jesus’ teachings and miracles. The gospels show Jesus miraculously feeding 5,000 people (Luke 9:10-17) shows “God’s Messiah feeding God’s people”¹³ and the occasions when he resurrected people from the dead can be seen as physical evidence of the eternal life which he promises.

The parable of the great supper (Luke 14:15-24) also pictures the Kingdom of God as banquet whilst the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) teaches that there will be a point in the future where God differentiates between those who have truly followed him and those who claim to, but haven’t done so.

⁹ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p149

¹⁰ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p149

¹¹ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p133

¹² Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p149

¹³ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p149

Conclusion

Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God is in some respects highly complex. The gospels do not necessarily give a clear indication of what the Kingdom of God is or necessarily what it means. We do however get some key themes emerging from Jesus' life, teaching and ministry, which focus on the Kingdom in relation to God the Father, individuals, the world and finally the future. Piecing these aspects together helps us to understand something of what Jesus was saying about the Kingdom of God.

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