

Speaking of the Kingdom
Ascension Day 2008

“To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. Acts 1:3

We sometimes shake our heads when we hear the disciples of Jesus asking Him, “Lord, will You at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?” but is it really such a surprise? Of course the disciples were thinking about the kingdom. Our text tells us that when Jesus had been appearing to them for the past forty days, *the kingdom of God was exactly what He had been speaking about.*

When He breathed on them and put the Holy Spirit upon them and told them that whatever sins they would forgive on earth would be forgiven in heaven, *He was speaking of the Kingdom.*

When He met the disciples on the shores of the sea of Tiberius and reinstated Peter, when He asked Peter if he loved Him and then commanded Peter to feed the Good Shepherd’s sheep, *He was speaking of the Kingdom.*

When He opened the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and did the same for the apostles in our Gospel lesson for today, revealing that everything written about Him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms had been fulfilled, and that the Christ, who had suffered for the sins of the world and on the third day risen from the dead would be proclaimed, and repentance and forgiveness of sins preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem, *He was most decidedly speaking about the Kingdom.*

The disciples were not wrong to be thinking about the Kingdom of God. They just needed to know that the Kingdom of God was much larger than they imagined it. This Kingdom would be

**Spiritual in character,
International in membership, and
Gradual in expansion.** (*cf. John Stott*)

When the Holy Spirit would come upon them, they would not have to look deep within to find inner resources which would allow them to express their spirituality. On that day, Jesus tells us in verse 49 of our Gospel lesson, they will be *clothed* with power *from on high*. And according to our text, these were also the theme of the last words Jesus said before He ascended into heaven: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when they had said these things, while they were looking on, He was lifted up. The disciples left the Mount of Olives rejoicing and praising God and returned to Jerusalem to wait for their Lord to keep His promise, and ten days later the Spirit was poured out on the church at Pentecost, and the church, the kingdom was established on the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. And it became clear that the kingdom was spiritual in character, international in membership from day one, and gradually expanding not only geographically but

throughout all of time, still expanding until the day Jesus returns in the way they saw Him leave.

The Kingdom is established not by angels but by apostles, not by force of law or superiority of arms, but by faithful testimony of the Word of God, the foolishness of preaching, the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name. We are called to be witnesses of the accusations of His Law and the sure promises of His Gospel. Christ's Witnesses, not God's Law Enforcement Officers.

We all have too much knowledge of what can go wrong when a group of people tries to establish the Kingdom of God by force of law or conquest. Our relations with the various countries of the Middle East have been harsh tutors of these truths. Yet even in this country people have sometimes tried to bring in their vision of the Kingdom of God by force of arms, or to present their own country as the kingdom of God here on earth.

You might have heard of the American Party of the mid-1800s, who believed that we were letting far too many immigrants into this country, especially too many Irish Catholics. The American Party was popularly known as the Know Nothing party, because any time one tried to get information about their meetings, their members would claim to know nothing about them. Their determination to limit Roman Catholic influence in these United States left a literal scar on our nation's capital that can be seen to this day.

It was 1854, and funding for the construction of the Washington Monument had run out. As Congress appropriated another \$200,000 for the project, an invitation was issued to every state, every Indian nation and all foreign countries for each to furnish a block cut for the construction. Not only would this lower the cost slightly by reducing the number of blocks that would have to be quarried, cut and paid for by the government, but it would also encourage states, tribes and other countries to accompany their stone blocks with generous donations. All the states responded to the plan, as did many of the native American nations and several foreign countries. When it became known that Pope Pius IX had sent a block of marble from the Temple of Concord in Rome, the Know Nothings rose in outrage. At 2:00 in the morning on March 6, 1854, they used stones from the site to barricade the watchman in his hut, then stole the Pope's stone. Some say they destroyed it with hammers, some say they buried it, and others maintain the stone was simply tossed in the Potomac. The Know Nothings also seized control of the records of the Monument Committee, and appointed their own members to sit on it. Congress rescinded its \$200,000 funding bill, and work on the Washington Monument simply came to a halt, with the monument only 128 feet high, a little over a quarter of its projected height. When Mark Twain visited the site in 1867 he described it as looking "like a factory chimney with the top broken off." Work was halted for more than two decades, and in the meantime quarry they had been using ran out, so the builders were forced to use another quarry whose stone did not quite match.

What had all this accomplished? Twenty-one years later, work resumed, anyway. The immigrants just kept coming the whole time. They still are coming today, and the majority of them are still Catholic, or as I like to describe them, brothers and sisters in

Christ. Nothing the American Party tried had any lasting impact, and the whole thing would be forgotten if it were not for the lasting mark of their foolishness in the color of the monument's stone.

God's plan to bring in His Kingdom is better and more effective, and it is, after all, to be followed because it is the plan of our God. The church of Christ, by the commission of Christ, in the power of the Spirit and by the authority of the Father, continues to be of service to the Kingdom of God. And every day, since a Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago, repentance and forgiveness of sins are still proclaimed to the nations, in the name of Jesus.

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