



He talked of a kingdom, Jesus did. In him, it is “at hand,” he said.<sup>1</sup> It’s why we’re called to repent and believe, because it would be a fearful thing otherwise. “[P]repare to meet thy God, O Israel,” the prophet Amos warned; our forebears had a better mind of it; they understood better and more soberly than we that God’s advent and his kingdom were to be feared before welcomed.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus spoke of a kingdom, it wasn’t a metaphor, a figure of speech. It was a real kingdom; he meant what he said. The “kingdom of God is among you.”<sup>3</sup> It’s just that we have so often forgot what that means.

Centuries ago there was a bishop named Eusebius, a prominent figure in the age of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. For him, what was meant by the kingdom of God was clear: it was the Roman emperor—Caesar, Constantine—who received from Christ, “the Great Sovereign himself” and in “imitation of God himself, the administration of this world’s affairs.”<sup>4</sup> For him, the kingdom of God was the Roman empire turned Christian, earthly government established in the service of heaven. It is a dream which has been dreamt, of course, by many ever since, the idea of political theology. It’s an idea with a violent legacy, the bloody legacy of kingdoms and states. By means of the Enlightenment, we meant to do away with it—the idea that human governments and human politics were divine. But we didn’t get rid of it; we just turned our politics into religion, the nation into the church. These are the bad dreams of every modern nation, the bad dreams of America too. But that’s to talk about other things—the deeper sickness of our present social anger.

But that kingdom Jesus talked about: what is it? To talk of another ancient bishop, an Egyptian, this one, Saint Athanasius the Great: for him, the kingdom of Jesus wasn’t to be found in the Roman empire, in Caesars converted; rather, for him, the kingdom of Jesus was the kingdom of converted heathen and the kingdom of the martyrs who were brave enough to mock death and to be killed for Christ. These pagans, he said, “when they hear the teaching of Christ...they turn from fighting to farming, and instead of arming themselves with swords extend their hands in prayer...instead of fighting each other, they take up arms against the devil and the daemons, and overcome them by their self-command and integrity of soul.”<sup>5</sup> This, for him, was the kingdom of God which Jesus gave, which he promised his apostles—that distinct, redeemed, holy community of Christians.<sup>6</sup> Those who lived the faith in peace and even death, because they believed—really believed—what Jesus said was true.

It’s what Jesus called his kingdom, what we used to mean by the word “Church.” Before, of course, we ruined the word with our denominations and our cultural Catholicism. Being a Catholic used to mean you believed the Catholic faith, that you held it and lived it—again, because you believed it, and not because by some accident of history or birth you found yourself a Catholic. This is what’s so problematic about talking about “identity”—Christians and churches and organizations

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>2</sup> Amos 4:12

<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:21

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *In Praise of Constantine* 1.1-6

<sup>5</sup> Athanasius the Great, *On the Incarnation* 29, 52

<sup>6</sup> Luke 22:29

and people talking about their “identity,” it’s one of the more dangerous pathologies of our age.<sup>7</sup> Our identity is nothing other than Christ alive in our hearts and in our words and our actions; which is why, of course, we so often can’t call ourselves genuine Christians or Catholics, because no matter our perceived or declared status, our actions betray us for the pagans we are. Because we forgot what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom; because we don’t understand what we mean we talk about the Church.

When John, in the Book of Revelation, saw the great multitude, which he couldn’t count—“from every nation, race, people, and tongue”—all of them, standing before the Lamb: that is the kingdom of God, the kingdom Jesus talked about, the kingdom which will outlast all kingdoms, even our own.<sup>8</sup> But it’s not a kingdom you may take for granted, a kingdom you can simply be born into, remaining passive and remain a citizen. There is no passport for this kingdom other than your own Christian heart, your godly life, your absolved soul; there is no other entry. It’s a kingdom born of faith, born of hearing the voice of the King himself. “My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me.”<sup>9</sup> If you do not hear this voice; if you do not follow—you are not in this kingdom, nor will you ever see it, no matter whatever you call yourself, no matter your birth, no matter your Catholic schooling, no matter the tricks of piety or the heartfelt words of sentimentality. The kingdom is for those who listen and follow. Which is why all our noise is the most dangerous and difficult feature of our world today—dangerous, because it’s hard simply to listen, hard simply to hear anything anymore. Because hell is noise, and our world has become a noisy place.

Which is why the best advice I can offer you today, the only wisdom I can pass along, are the words of Saint Benedict. “Listen carefully,” he said, “to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.”<sup>10</sup> Amidst the noise, these are words we need today, we who call ourselves Christians, we who say we follow the Good Shepherd: “Listen carefully.” Do we listen? It’s the first question of the kingdom, the first question of salvation. Do you listen? For me, it’s a chilling question. Amen.

©2019 Rev. Joshua J. Whitfield

---

<sup>7</sup> See Chantal Delsol, *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, 128

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 7:9

<sup>9</sup> John 10:27

<sup>10</sup> *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Prologue