

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
What was Jesus' Favorite Topic?

What was Jesus' favorite topic? Strangely, it's something that Christians today rarely discuss - unless you happen to be a New Testament scholar. But in the Gospels, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke we find it all the time. In the opening of Mark's Gospel, for example, we read, "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the *gospel of God's kingdom*. The appointed time has come, he said, *and the kingdom of God is near at hand*." (Mark 1:14-15)

Nearly all of Jesus' parables begin with "Kingdom of God is like . . ." Jesus takes it for granted that his audience has some expectation concerning this "Kingdom." Even at the end of his ministry, his disciples frame his whole public life in light of this expectation: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) What is this kingdom?

Obviously, the concept was familiar to his Galilean and Judean audience, even though it is unfamiliar to us. So if you want to understand Jesus' teachings and the Catholic faith, you need to confront this idea of the "Kingdom of God." There are two points I wish to emphasize: "The Kingdom of God" expresses an Old Testament expectation; this expectation finds its fulfillment in the Catholic Church.

First, the Old Testament. Jesus' Jewish disciples responded enthusiastically (even if they did not always understand him correctly), because they had a well-founded, biblical hope in "The Kingdom of God." Throughout the Old Testament, we find the anticipation that God's reign will be acknowledged throughout the whole world, and that justice and peace will be the result.

We find this expectation in the Psalms, the Prophets, and especially in the Book of Daniel. In Daniel, we read of "The Ancient of Days" seated on a throne before the whole world. The prophet tells us: "But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, forever and ever." (Daniel 7:18)

So, when Jesus burst on the scene "preaching the gospel of the Kingdom," this was something that resonated strongly with the Jewish people of Judaea and Galilee. Even more, his miracles confirmed that the kingdom really had come with power. " But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, he said, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Luke 11:20)

Sometimes Scripture represents this kingdom with a human figure - a messianic king who rules in God's name (Isaiah 9:6), a Son of David (2 Samuel 7), a suffering servant (Isaiah 42; Isaiah 53), a "Son of Man" (Daniel 7:13). His kingdom would bring righteousness, justice, a New Covenant, an outpouring of God's spirit, written on the heart. (Jeremiah 31)

But how does this kingdom relate to the Church? Jesus himself brings the two into intimate contact. In the very charter of the Church, Christ establishes the connection:

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you

bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:18-19)

Notice that Christ establishes the Church, under Peter's authority, as the venue for encountering the Kingdom. Christ associates Peter's authority over the Church with the keys of the kingdom of heaven. It is through the Church that God's kingdom spreads throughout the world.

This is also the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. In the document *Lumen Gentium* we read, "The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world."

With eyes of faith, we can now see the fulfillment of Christ's words and of Biblical prophecy. Today, the Catholic Church reaches to the four corners of the world. As the prophets foretold, the God of Israel is acknowledged everywhere. And the lives of the saints offer testimony to the pouring out of God's Spirit on all flesh. The gates of Hell have not prevailed.

To be sure, our work is not complete. We still pray, "Thy Kingdom Come!" The Council says that the Church is

To be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While it slowly grows, the Church strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its King. (*Lumen Gentium*)

We are still looking forward to the full completion of the Messianic promises, the second coming, and the resurrection of the dead. "Then the end will come," says St. Paul, "when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power." (1 Corinthians 15:24) Until that time, the kingdom has come "in mystery." But in the Church, we see that it has truly come. The kingdom of God is here!