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A Sense of Calling: Vocation in the Academic Life

Zeni Fox

Introduction

In young adulthood, I encountered the Biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God. It has provided a framework for my understanding of God's desire for the world, and for each of us, and has been a touchstone for judging the events of life, personal and societal. I have frequently used this symbol as a way of exploring meaning with various groups, including faculty, administrators and support staff at two Catholic colleges. I think that this symbol can provide a framework for understanding the collectivity of vocations in a university – teachers in the varied disciplines, and the administrators, professionals and support staff who share in the task of the institution.

In this article, first I will draw on the poetry of the Bible to uncover various dimensions of this symbol, and the ways in which the hope which it embodies responds to the deepest yearnings of the human heart. It is my experience that persons from varied religious traditions, and no religious tradition, identify with the human desires evoked by the poetry, and the theological concepts drawn from the texts. Second, I will share some ways this symbol has impacted my life, personally and professionally. Third, I will outline some of the varied works of the human community which embody actions toward the Kingdom, toward a world in which the deep desires of the human heart are fulfilled. Fourth, I will apply the texts to the work of an academic institution – the various disciplines, and services, which comprise the school. Finally, I will delineate some recent theological exploration which sees the Kingdom of God as the central point of focus in the life, teaching and meaning of Jesus, and the horizon of the work of the Church, and therefore of a Catholic university.¹

A Horizon of Hope and Meaning

The Hebrew Scriptures include a large number of individual texts, and an even greater range of literary forms, written over centuries, and drawn from an oral tradition older still than the texts themselves. One way of approaching these writings is to search for themes that can be traced throughout the books. One theme is that of the Kingdom of God – the symbol of the expectations of a people. The Israelite community envisioned a time when God would fulfill all their hopes, all their desires, because Yahweh was a God who loved them, and would fully save them. The Scriptures proclaim that when God's reign comes in its fullness, hunger will be no more; each family will have its own fig tree. There will be no more sickness, and beauty and truth will fill the land. Peace will flower, the lion and the lamb lying down together, with love and understanding manifest among all the peoples. Holiness and happiness, freedom and completion will shine forth in the whole community – a people once captive in Egypt, a people once captive by selfishness, now free at last. In the books of the Torah, the Psalms, the writings of the prophets, and also the Christian Scriptures, we find these visions of a future in which God's plan is fulfilled.² Here, a few instances will serve to proclaim this great theme in the language of poetry, a language with a power to articulate desire and hope more fully than that of prose and abstraction.

*Fullness and Plenty*³

I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians, and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow...

Numbers 3:8.

On every roadway they will graze,
and each bare height shall be their pasture.
They will never hunger or thirst,
scorching wind and sun shall never plague them;
for he who pities them will lead them
and guide them to springs of water.

Isaiah 49:9-10

Health and Well-Being

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
the ears of the deaf unsealed,
then the lame shall leap like a deer
and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.

Isaiah 35:5-6

On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book; and out of gloom and darkness,
the eyes of the blind shall see. The lowly will ever find joy in the Lord, and the poor
rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 29:18-19

Beauty and Truth

Yahweh, God of Gods,
speaks, he summons the earth.
From east to west,
from Zion, perfection of beauty, He shines.

Psalms 50:1-2

Send out your light and your truth
let these be my guide,
to lead me to your holy mountain
and to the place where you live.

Psalms 43:3

... for the water gushes in the desert,
streams in the wasteland,
the scorched earth becomes a lake,
the parched land springs of water.
The lairs where the jackals used to live
become thickets of reed and papyrus.

Isaiah 35:6b-7

Love and Understanding

Yahweh will yield authority over the nations
and adjudicate between many peoples;
these will hammer their swords into plowshares,
their spears into sickles.
Nation will not lift sword against nation,
there will be no more training for war.

Isaiah 2:4

He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.

Micah 5:3-4

Holiness and Happiness

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord...

Jeremiah 31:33-34

Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'You see this city? Here God lives among the people. He will make his home among them; they shall be his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness... I will give water from the well of life free to anybody who is thirsty; it is the rightful inheritance of the one who proves victorious, and I will be their God, and they children to me.'

Revelation 21:3-4, 7

Freedom and Completion

And Yahweh said, 'I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow... And now the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them, so come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt.'

Exodus 3:7-10

I, Yahweh, have called you to serve the cause of right;
I have taken you by the hand and formed you;
I have appointed you as a covenant of the people and the light of the nations,
to open the eyes of the blind,
to free captives from prison,
and those who live in darkness from the dungeon.
Isaiah 42:6-7

The images from these texts are part of the tapestry of our culture. A wall across the street from the United Nations headquarters in New York City depicts swords being beaten into plowshares, and is inscribed with the text from Isaiah, chapter 2. At Christmas, greeting cards with lions and lambs abound – some religious, some secular in their style and message, all evoking the promise of peace. “Sweet honey from the rock” is celebrated in popular music, and “let my people go” in African-American spirituals, both images that tap into our wellsprings of hope. Ancient texts, ancient symbols, articulating the deep desires of the heart, informing and shaping our lives today.

A Personal Digression

My first encounter with the symbol, the kingdom of God, came in an Old Testament course, my first in graduate school. The professor read his lectures, seated, in a voice so low that it was hard to hear him. His focus was on the exegesis of individual texts, and I tried to write notes about what seemed to have no cohesion, just as fast as I could. There was a monumental amount of reading. But gradually, a picture emerged, a vision of certain themes, paramount among them, the kingdom of God. My professor, Msgr. Myles Bourke, was a giant in Catholic Biblical scholarship, a discipline still young in this period, and the class was filled with people from various countries, come to learn from him. I was quite intimidated! But for me, the discoveries were more than exegetical, scholarly; they were a glimpse of a new way of understanding God, and God's relation with us. Truly, my heart rejoiced at the beauty of the texts, the splendor of the promises.

Through the years, particularly in the season of Advent, individual texts provided a focus for me. Their hope made me hopeful. At various points in my life, teaching high school, working in parish religious education, giving lectures to diverse groups, as part of various graduate courses, I taught about the kingdom, always with joy, wanting to share this wellspring of meaning. As I encountered more of the struggles of life, personally and professionally, I developed a little mantra, “It's not the kingdom yet.” There was realism in that view, but not cynicism; hope remained.

Over time, I began to “read” societal events in light of the promises. I rejoiced when varied green revolutions were reported, greater “fullness and plenty.” I read with approval when institutions, warehouses, really, to house the mentally challenged were closed, and a plan for living in apartments was fostered: “freedom and completion.” I supported the founding of a peace academy, to parallel the military academies, to foster “love and understanding.” And I allowed the light of the Scripture texts to give deeper meaning to the ordinary events of my life – preparing food for special celebrations, planning communal gatherings, teaching so as to open out diverse views in a sympathetic way.

And so in this essay, I have a desire to share this symbol with others, because of its power, beauty, hopefulness. But also because I believe that it has a particular relevance to the work of the human community, in its totality, and to the work of a Catholic college and university, in particular.

In Pursuit of the Promise

The human community can be envisioned as actively in pursuit of the fullness of the Kingdom of God, in its various dimensions, through the everyday work of our lives. It is possible to think of each individual who contributes to the common good as having been drawn by the Spirit of God into the work they do, drawn through the deep desires of their hearts. Within a passionate caring about justice or beauty or peace is the seed of vocation, of calling, of invitation to do *this* good for others. Not always fully reflected on, nonetheless the stirrings of the soul which lead to action in a particular realm may be read as pursuit of the values of the Kingdom of God. The works are infinitely varied; some examples will illustrate this.

Fullness and plenty suggest not just enough food, but an abundance of good food, and a sense of celebration together in sharing the bounty. Homemakers and restaurateurs, soup kitchen workers and agricultural researchers, farmers and those who process food all pursue this good. In addition, an organization like Bread for the World, the Christian hunger advocacy group, has this goal, and when legislators and politicians address hunger concerns, they do as well. The Scriptural image of a great end-time banquet captures the sense of completion of the work of all who strive for fullness and plenty.

Health and well-being are dominant concerns of modern times. Certainly, in every age there have been medicine men/women, herbalists, physicians, healers of all kinds, but today there are great segments of the society engaged in attention to this human value. Individuals such as doctors and nurses come quickly to mind, but all of those who work in health care institutions must be included – administrators and technicians, maintenance workers and cleaners, lab workers and secretaries. Beyond such settings, pharmaceutical companies (researchers through marketers, and more) and city sanitation workers represent some of the many others committed to physical health. The pursuit of mental well-being engages counselors, 12 step program workers, psychiatrists, researchers, and writers of many self-help books, to name a few. The image of the lame dancing and the dumb and depressed singing expresses the joy of fulfillment of the work of all those pursuing health and well-being.

Beauty and truth are the realms of painters and philosophers, musicians and mathematicians, homebuilders and journalists, city planners and theologians, homemakers and physicists, gardeners and teachers, carpenters and historians, poets and detectives, sculptors and judges. Gerard Manley Hopkins bemoaned the fact that the world too often “bears man's smudge.” Yet at the same time there are great numbers of men and women committed to creating beauty. Deceit and hypocrisy seem ever with us, but the effort to seek truth, and proclaim truth, is seen every day. The drawings our earliest ancestors left in prehistoric caves, and the making of music even in the concentration camps of World War II attest to the perennial triumph of the movement toward beauty. Today, works as varied as the efforts of truth and reconciliation commissions and the sending of astronauts to the moon attest to the incessant drive of the human community toward truth. The human spirit blossoms when fed with beauty and truth, when this value of the Kingdom is nourished.

Holiness and happiness are sought in every age, by individuals for themselves, and by individuals and groups on behalf of others. Holiness as wholeness - as the human person fully alive, as the human person living his/her unique vocation - embraces both of these human desires, seeing them as vitally connected. A signal of the centrality of these concerns today can be seen in any bookstore, in the great number of books devoted to self-help and to spiritual growth. Indeed, such books have tended to dominate best-seller lists in recent years. The writers and publishers of these books – both more secular guides such as F. Scott Peck and Parker Palmer, and more religious guides such as Thomas Merton

and Mother Theresa – have sought holiness and happiness themselves, and seek to share their wisdom with the community. Parents work to guide their children, when they are little, and even when they are adults, in the paths of holiness and happiness. Friends counseling friends and therapists with their patients endeavor to suggest ways to grow in holiness and happiness, as do religious leaders and spiritual guides. Spiritual directors with their directees and spouses with their partners focus their love and concern toward the holiness and happiness of the other. The desire for holiness and happiness is found everywhere.

Freedom and completion are values at the core of the culture of the United States. In Philadelphia, home of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Freedom Hall and the Freedom Bell are central icons visited every year by great crowds of citizens. Freedom is a value seen as worth devoting one's life to – even dying for. Our legislators, in federal and state houses, shape laws to guard the freedom of the people, judges seek to define the application of laws toward this human good, and police protect against offenses. But freedom is not only, not even primarily, a political reality. The freedom of the human spirit is part of the quest of philosophers and poets, and even of adventurers who seek to plumb the depths and scale the heights of our earth. Social reformers who are today's voice against oppression – “Let my people go” – and spiritual leaders who proclaim “the freedom of the sons and daughters of God” are filled with desire for the freedom and completion of the people of our times.

The Kingdom and the University

The vision of the Kingdom explored here is an expression of the desires of the human heart, as they were given particular articulation in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Understood this way, the symbol has a universalism which makes it an apt image to embrace the diversity of disciplines and roles which are the fabric of a university. As a symbol, it has the potential for motivating individuals, and of drawing them together in a commonality of purpose. It engages the imagination, a powerful dimension of the human psyche.

In the latter years of the 20th century, a new appreciation of the role of the imagination emerged in various disciplines.⁴ Educators, sociologists, physicists and theologians were among those who focused attention on the shaping power of symbols relative to the consciousness of individuals and of groups. We note that an engagement ring changes the perceptions a man and a woman have of each other, and that their families and friends have of them. The lowering of the flag of one nation and raising of another nation's engenders powerful feelings, signals new allegiances, evokes new understandings of a people. The symbol of the Kingdom invites the realization that we can contribute to the coming of a time when fullness and plenty, health and well-being, beauty and truth, love and understanding, holiness and happiness fill the land, when the Kingdom comes in its fullness. This realization can inspire a deeper appreciation of our work, individually and collectively, and motivate to a deeper commitment and purpose.

In one way, certain Kingdom values seem especially congruent with particular disciplines and campus services, such as health and well being as a goal in the School of Nursing and the Office of Health Services. At the same time, individuals might define themselves as embodying a particular value in a special way, such as a science teacher who focuses on the ways that researchers are addressing world hunger issues, out of personal concern for the value of fullness and plenty. Collective and individual pondering of the varied aspects of the symbol of the Kingdom can yield insight which may engage deep dimensions of consciousness. These actions are part of the deepening appreciation of the calling or

vocation of each individual, and the community itself. An academic community focused on together exploring, articulating and pursuing the values of the Kingdom would grow in intentionality and a sense of shared purpose, as well as commitment to this mission.

The Kingdom and the Catholic University

In our time and place in history, there are particular challenges faced by Catholic institutions, indeed, by all the institutions of our society. Excessive individualism, captured so well in the image of “bowling alone,” is an obstacle to the formation of communities of shared vision, values, purpose. The increasing diversity of our populace, the peoples of the world coming to our shores, and colleges, while certainly a great gift, makes intentional efforts for creating communities of discourse ever more important. The sheer pace of life, of change in our lives, is not only exhausting at times, but also places limitations on time for being with others. The kingdom of God is a symbol which, when pondered deeply, invites us toward commonality of effort, and communion of minds and hearts. The promises inherent in the vision of the reign of God are not simply to us as individuals, but to all of us together, brothers and sisters blessed by the gifts of God's kingdom.

A characteristic of Catholic colleges and universities today is that we no longer exist as Catholic enclaves, but rather as meeting places for people of every, and no religion. As shown above, the Kingdom can be understood in a universalist sense, and embracing, and being embraced by, a diversity of people. However, it is also a symbol particular to the Catholic Christian tradition. Jesus opened his public ministry by reading from the text of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favor...
Then he began to speak to them, "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen."
Luke 4:18-22

His parables proclaimed the Kingdom, and his actions demonstrated that the promises were being fulfilled in and through him. Contemporary scholars see the theme of the Kingdom as the heart of the teaching and life of Jesus.⁵ The Church continues the mission that Jesus began; Catholic institutional ministries such as colleges and universities are part of this great work. It can be said that preparing the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God is inherent in the mission of a Catholic university. In a setting with students, teachers, administrators and diverse employees from a variety of religious traditions, and no religious tradition, it is the universalist understanding of this symbol which will primarily inform the life of the school. But at the same time, the particular understanding of this symbol, as proclaimed and fulfilled in a special way by Jesus, will inform the deepest sense of the mission of the school. Those who share a commitment to the Catholic Christian faith will be the particular bearers of this mission, focused with intention and commitment on continuing the mission that Jesus began.

1. Feminist scholarship has critiqued the limitations of this symbol. While agreeing with the arguments offered, that the language is obsolete and sexist, I see a value in the deepest meaning of the symbol, a new age when the promises of the Kingdom will be fulfilled, a response to the desires of the human heart.

2. An early exposition of this theme is found in C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (SCM Press: London, 1936). Building on Dodd, and expanding his thought, is Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1963). See also *God's Rule and Kingdom*, Rudolf Schnackenburg (Palm Publishers: Montreal, 1963) and John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1953). More recently, Albert Nolan explores this theme in chapters 6-12 of his *Jesus Before Christianity* (New York: Orbis, 1976, seventh printing, 1998); see also Walter Wink, "The Kingdom: God's Domination-Free Order" in *Communion, Community, Commonwealth*, ed. John Mogabgab (Upper Room Books: Nashville, 1995).

3. I am indebted for some of the language describing the values of the Kingdom, as used here, to Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith* (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1991).

4. From a theological perspective, see Kathleen R. Fischer, *The Inner Rainbow: The Imagination in Christian Life* (Paulist Press: New York, 1983).

5. For example, Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Orbis: New York, 1976, 7th. printing, 1998).