

Rev. Barbara Ballenger

To what can the Kingdom of God be Compared?

I very nearly decided not to preach on the Gospel today. Taken at face value it didn't look helpful this week – when blood is flowing through the streets of Israel and the Occupied Territories of Palestine, when violent regimes, set on the most evil forms of destruction, vie to destroy one another, and the people in between know only the wailing of those cast into darkness.

I'd much rather hang out with Paul's sweet Philippian community and help settle whatever dispute that Euodia and Syntyche are facing, and work alongside the fellow faithful. I'd like to rejoice and experience some gentleness and revel at all the good and beautiful gifts that God has placed among us.

I like that version of the Kingdom of God better than the kingdom described in today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew– that of an angry King who levels the city of friends that spurn his invitation to a party, and who then humiliates and ejects a guest who is among those he has forced to take their place.

Compared to what I know of the Kingdom of God, this kingdom seems to fall quite short. So I was pleased to stumble upon author Debi Thomas's take on this story in the webzine *Journey with Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> In her essay Thomas dispenses with the traditional interpretation of this Scripture that makes it an allegory with God as the father, Jesus as the son, the gentiles as the lucky guests who get invited at the end, and Israel as those who spurn the invitation and have their city leveled in retaliation.

I want to say something here about this moment in today's Gospel where the king destroys the murderers and burns their city. Commentators say that this line was likely added later, and refers to the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In that historical event, a group of Jewish rebels, violently resisting Roman rule, held Jerusalem for five months until Rome struck back, leveled Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, which was never rebuilt. Israel, including Jewish Christians, was then scattered in a global diaspora.

If this is a story about God's Kingdom then the implication is that Jerusalem deserved what it got that year.

*Thompson writes: I grieve this reading now, and I repent of it. I repent of the way it automatically privileges me — my obedience, my good choices, my reward. I repent of the callous acceptance of vindictiveness, violence, and cruelty at its heart. And I repent of the anti-Semitism it espouses in the name of Christ.*

Scriptures like this, where the authors are working through deep internal or external conflicts in often violent language, have long been used to justify the destruction of dissenters or critics or enemies, or people simply in the way of empire. And Thomas is done with that. I agree with her.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The God Who Isn't* By Debie Thomas. Posted 04 October 2020. Journey with Jesus . A Webzine for the Global Church. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2777-the-god-who-isn-t>. Accessed 10.14.23

Instead she suggests we read the story that reflects the approach of New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine, who turns a Jewish lens onto the Christian stories in a way that challenges the anti-Semitism to which they are often put to use.

I was actually surprised to notice that Jesus begins this parable by saying that the Kingdom of God may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He does not say it is like a king who gave a banquet as I've often thought it said. What if Jesus is comparing and contrasting God's Kingdom to something that is not like the Kingdom of God at all?

What if the story went more like this: Let's compare God's Kingdom to another kingdom we may all be familiar with.

In that Kingdom the King holds a wedding feast for his son and invites all his friends and allies. But when his slaves are sent to tell them to come to the party, they mock the king, and they go back to their places of business, and they make sport of his slaves, even put them to death. Some friends.

So the King gets mad and murders them and burns down their city. Because he can.

But he still has a party to throw. So he decides to hold a spectacle, draw a new crowd, this time inviting the riff raff to share his opulence. And so he sends his slaves out again, and has them just round people up off the streets. All sorts of people. All crammed together at the party and told to look like they're having a good time.

This reminds me a little of what cities in first century Rome looked like – all sorts of conquered, rounded up people who live on top of one another and are forced to worship Ceasar.

But then the king runs up against someone who is not participating like the others, not pretending to honor the king. You can tell by the way he's dressed—he's not even making an effort. And the king takes exception to what he's wearing. Maybe the King is baiting the guy – hey why aren't you wearing any nice clothes, don't you care about what a great party I'm throwing? One of those dangerous questions, that don't end well for some people.

And most insulting of all, this guy doesn't even have the temerity to grovel and apologize and explain himself or make excuses. He just stands there in silence. He doesn't say a mumbling word.

Debi Thomas suggests that this person is Jesus – the one rounded up with all the others, who stands out in quiet opposition. That's not unlike how Jesus stood before his accusers -- before Herod and before Pilate before his execution – in silence.<sup>2</sup>

And so the king orders the man to be bound hand and foot and thrown out into the darkness.

Debi Thomas writes:

---

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Adam Hollowell makes this point in a sermon given at Duke University Chapel on Oct. 15, 2017. <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/10.15.17%20Adam%20Hollowell%20Sermon%20-%20A%20Parable.pdf>

*What would change for you if Jesus was the unrobed guest and not the furious king in this story? How would you have to change to welcome such a guest? To honor such a guest? To accompany such a guest? What robes of privilege, power, wealth, empire, location, and complicity would you have to refuse to wear? What holy rebuke would you have to speak or embody when the king demands your cheery presence at his table? What feasts would you have to forego to follow the unrobed dissenter when he's escorted into the darkness, bound and broken for the sake of love?*

Thomas and I are taking liberties with Matthew's story. Most commentators would likely not agree with us. They caution against softening stories of God's judgment, against the temptation to flatten them so that no one ever has to feel bad for their sinfulness, their rejection of God.

Biblical Scholar NT Wright suggests that it's the leaders of Israel who are the original guests who reject the invitation. It's the poor and lame and marginalized of Israel and beyond who get invited in their place. And the wedding clothes are the truth --: "the truth that God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered."<sup>3</sup> If you don't clothe yourself in that truth, you aren't dressed for the kingdom, and you don't belong at the feast.

I'm no Scripture scholar. And I usually bow to the wisdom of folks like NT Wright.

But here I'm afraid of what even this more nuanced reading of Matthew can do after a week of war in the Holy Land, when the dry grass of anti-Semitism and anti-Arabism need only a careless match to ignite it. Here. In this country.

This set of parables from Matthew, told while Jesus is in Jerusalem, are absolutely about his conflict with the Judean authorities of his own people Israel. But I still wonder if rather than telling a story of their replacement, he is not asking his leaders – which side are you on? How does the kingdom you serve compare to the kingdom of God? Because in the Scriptures that follow, those offended Scribes and Pharisees try to trick Jesus into a discussion about paying taxes to Ceasar.

Give to Ceasar what is Ceasar's, he will tell them. Give to God what belongs to God.

And so if the Kingdom of God does not compare to the kingdom of this parable in Matthew, what is it like?

Here I think we should return to Paul's intimate letter to the diverse people of Philippi, people who are suffering their own disagreements and deep conflicts – much like so many communities of the Jesus movement – both then and now. Perhaps the Kingdom of God that dwells among us, that is at hand, prompts us to address grievances and disagreements through the common ground of a common God,

---

<sup>3</sup> Wright, N. T. Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28 (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 84). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

who might heal us of our animosity with one another. And so Paul says “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.” And he concludes with these powerful, re-orienting words:

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*