

DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

MODULE 1

LOOKING AT THE LAND

STUDY D: THE KINGDOM WITHIN

Jesus, the Kingdom, and the Doctrine of Discovery

OF KINGS AND KINGDOMS

The idea of *kingdom* was an important way many of our ancient ancestors developed their first large-scale systems of social and political organization. A kingdom gets its power from a monarch. The power of the kingdom *is* the power of the monarch. As a geographical reality, a kingdom is defined by those lands and peoples where the monarch's power is acknowledged and obeyed.

Some of the first great kingdoms were empires: Egypt, Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, and the dynasties of China. Smaller-scale republics and kingdoms developed in India: the mahajanapadas. In the regions of Central and South America, the Aztecs and Mayans developed large and powerful empires before the time of Columbus. In many ancient kingdoms, the monarch owned everything. The king (or, in some instances, a queen) would grant subjects the right to farm land or have a house, but most of the time it was taken for granted that ownership belonged exclusively to the monarch. In an ancient kingdom, the monarch's word became the law of the land.

Later on, in various places, new forms of social organization developed—nation states and democracies, for example. Common citizens came to see themselves as people who had authority and could own land and property. Laws still defined how society would operate as people work together for the common good. However, constitutions, legislative assemblies, and democratically elected officials replaced the power of monarchs. The flow of power in society “flipped”: whereas in ancient kingdoms, power flowed downward from the monarch to people, modern democratic nations came to understand power residing in the people, who pass it on to officials they elect.

The Doctrine of Discovery emerges out of the older, more ancient concept of kingdom. The Doctrine imposes the authority of a monarch over lands being claimed by subjects of the monarch. It asserts that the domain of Christian rulers overrules the governance exercised by non-Christian leaders. By claiming foreign lands for a European monarch, Christians understood those lands to belong to the realm of the Christian monarch, without regard for the people currently inhabiting the land or the people's culture.

1. How would your life have been different if you lived in an ancient kingdom? Think about your home, your possessions, the land on which you live, your understanding of work.
2. Please consider how both your power to own things and the Doctrine of Discovery flow from the same sources in ancient understandings of *kingdom*. With that in mind, can you identify some common links between "ownership" and the Doctrine of Discovery? What basic assumptions do they share? How might the concept of *stewardship* be a radical alternative to ideas about property that prevail in our own culture?
3. How could the Doctrine of Discovery claim sovereignty over non-Christian people who may not recognize the authority of a European monarch?
4. In North America before the time of Columbus, indigenous peoples were not organized into kingdoms with Western understandings of land ownership. How do you think this affected the way they encountered and experienced the Doctrine of Discovery as Europeans began to invade their lands?
5. Can the Doctrine of Discovery operate in a culture that has no monarch? If it can, what does it look like? In the United States, how did Native American peoples experience domination even after there was no king?

ISRAEL AND THE KINGDOM

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us the descendants of Abraham and Sarah experienced the power of empire when those descendants became slaves in Egypt. After they were freed, they returned back to their homeland; the biblical account says they conquered the people who were living there and asserted their claim to the land. At first they were organized as a loose confederation of tribes. Eventually under Saul—and especially under David—

they reconfigured their life as a monarchy. At 2 Samuel 7:11-13, we read the story of how God promised David that his royal line would be eternal. Several decades later, the northern tribes separated and established their own kingdom, Israel, leaving the southern kingdom, Judah, to continue the royal line of David.

The power of empires again became central to this story, as first the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom, and later the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, took the Davidic king captive, and ended David's royal line.

During their time of exile in Babylon, the Judean captives began to organize their beliefs by collecting sacred writings to form the core of the Hebrew Scriptures. They continued to develop themes and traditions of the prophets. Among some of the people, a hope developed that one day a descendant of David might again become king, and the promises of God to David would be upheld. However, when the descendants of the Judean captives were later repopulated in their original home, hopes for a renewed kingdom did not come into reality. Instead, Judah was a province, first of the Persian and later of the Greek empires begun by Alexander the Great.

However, less than two centuries before the time of Jesus, these hopes for a kingdom were rekindled and partially established when Judas Maccabeus organized a revolt that led to the creation of the Hasmonean dynasty and a measure of independence for Jewish people. A mixture of priests and kings assumed authority for almost a century, until the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem and made the Hasmonean kings serve under the protection and supervision of Rome. Transfer of this "supervised" kingdom passed to Herod the Great and his descendants, but Rome still exercised imperial power in the land. This is the situation that existed at the time of Jesus.

- The Old Testament story shows a complex relationship between *land* and *identity*. There were times when the people could claim both land and identity. In other parts of their history, the people needed to claim identity without land. Can you name examples of each situation in the history of Israel/Judah? How would the counterpoint of these two situations shape this people's understanding of both land and identity?

JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

One of the hallmarks of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was his proclamation of the coming of *the kingdom of God*. By preaching the coming of this kingdom, Jesus was suggesting that God was preparing to stake a new kind of claim in the world.

Most often we encounter Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God in Jesus' parables. These are open-ended stories that easily led people into a variety of different interpretations. It seems that Jesus intended for his parables to work this way. This kingdom was not meant to be taught, but rather, to be discovered as Jesus' listeners tried to figure out what the parable might mean.

Given the flow of Jewish history, some of Jesus' listeners heard Jesus saying that the eternal kingdom that God had promised David was about to be re-inaugurated. This hope for a political kingdom was made more intense, the New Testament suggests, because Jesus' genealogy could be traced back to King David, making Jesus a potential heir to the throne.

Other people seemed to have heard in Jesus' preaching an imminent approach of apocalyptic cataclysms. These visions of the end of the world went back to the time of the Hasmoneans and the prophet Daniel. From this perspective, the kingdom of God would bring an end to history, as God's angelic armies would swoop down from heaven, defeat all of Israel's enemies, and usher in a new age of peace for God's people.

Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God—and the multiple interpretations his parables generated—led to greater and greater tension between Jesus and the different Jewish traditions around him. Eventually, it also led to tensions between Jesus and the rule of the Roman Empire. The end of Jesus' life drew the competing interpretive tensions in his preaching of the kingdom of God to a violent close.

1. In light of their history with the concept of kingdom of God, what are the people saying and claiming as they witness Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem for Passover? Look at Matthew 21:1-11.
2. How would the Roman Emperor and those who administer his realm have viewed Jesus' preaching about a "kingdom of God"? How would this interpretation be affected if there appears to be growing popular support for what Jesus is saying?

3. When Jesus celebrates Passover with his disciples, he declares that the broken bread is his body and the wine is his blood poured out for many. These actions and words have to be confusing—if not totally incomprehensible—to the disciples at the time of that meal. Look at Peter's reaction to this unfolding episode at Matthew 26:31-35. Does Peter think that at the supper Jesus is declaring that a revolution is about to begin? How does Matthew 26:47-52 shape this issue? (Note that John's gospel identifies Peter as the disciple who attacks with a sword; see John 18:10.)
4. Jesus is crucified under Roman law and by Roman authority. How does the inscription on Jesus' cross (see Matthew 27:37) relate to his preaching about the kingdom?
5. In Jesus' story, the disciples' interest in the kingdom of God extends beyond his death and resurrection, and is voiced at his ascension. Read Acts 1:6-8. What do you think these disciples are expecting to happen?

THE INTERIOR KINGDOM

Jesus' preaching about a *kingdom of God* was a significant factor in the events leading to his crucifixion. But the New Testament does not suggest that Jesus was a political revolutionary, out to overturn Roman rule by leading an armed rebellion. Some of the remembered words of Jesus in the gospels point to another possible interpretation of what Jesus meant as he proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom. For example, think about these verses from Luke 17:

²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among [or within] you."

In his parables, Jesus sometimes would speak about the kingdom growing as a planted seed, or as leaven working secretly inside dough. For Jesus, the essence of the kingdom was *transformation* that would happen inside people and within communities. Rather than being imposed from the outside by political force, the reign of God is to be experienced and discovered by people and communities discovering what it means to be claimed by God—claimed by God's unconditional love for them and for others.

In this way, the Beatitudes, the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, become a kind of map of what this transformative kingdom might look like:

³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

⁷ *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸ *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹ *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰ *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* (Matthew 5)

These words challenge, tease, and pull us toward a configuration of patterns of life that are radically different from the world we experience as "real." They also resonate with Jesus' own story, and especially with his violent death that ended in suffering and apparent defeat. The Christian conviction that God raised the Crucified One to life on Easter indicates that God's solidarity is, indeed, with the poor, the suffering, and the powerless. Something dramatic is happening to turn reality inside-out and to redefine the values and powers that pull the world and its story into God's future. However, Jesus' preaching does not point us simply toward a quiet, "personal" piety disengaged from the world around us. Rather, Jesus suggests that the hope for a better world starts from within individuals and communities, and works its way outward into history—inner transformation passing through us, through our communities of faith, and into the world.

1. Discuss how the Doctrine of Discovery is related to concepts about kingdoms in general and Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God. Is the Doctrine more closely aligned with Jesus' preaching or with the Roman understand of kingdom and authority that brought Jesus to the cross?
2. If Christians in the sixteenth century had been more closely aligned with Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God, how might that have made

a difference when Christians encountered indigenous populations in the Western Hemisphere?

3. How does Jesus' preaching about an "inner kingdom" give Christians a starting place different from the Doctrine of Discovery as we relate to Native American sisters and brothers today? How does the "inner kingdom" help lead us to repentance—not only repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, but setting ourselves on a course to work for deeper justice in the world?
4. Think of yourself and your community defined by the radical gentleness of the Beatitudes. How does the "Beatitude map" define a possible starting place for your community of faith to begin (or continue) to work with Native American neighbors on issues about land-justice and identity-justice?