

Make Israel Great Again

Acts 1:6-8

Following the resurrection encounters recorded at the end of the gospels, we are told by Luke in Acts 1:3 that *Jesus presented himself alive to (the apostles) after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the Kingdom of God.*

Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God/Heaven is the primary theme of his life from his first sermon, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17), to the framing of the Lord's prayer (Your Kingdom come...), to the cry of the thief who hung next to him on the cross, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Jesus outlines the Kingdom mission when he quotes Isaiah 61:1-2 at the start of his ministry (Luke 4:18-19) – most notably that the Kingdom is evidenced by Spirit empowered liberation of the oppressed and marginalized – this is where the will of the Father for the liberation of His people is manifest; the overthrow of the rule of darkness; the judgment of the powers.

In contrast to Jesus, we are shown the religious system and its representatives (the Temple Structure) who were trying to get Israel to obey all the religious rules in order to pave the way for and be worthy of the promised messiah, who would come to restore the kingdom of Israel. They believed that sinners were ruining everything for Israel, and that sickness, leprosy, and demonization were signs of God's judgment against individuals, while the continued Roman occupation was further evidence of God's displeasure with Israel as a sinful nation. This theological framework is still very much in evidence today – that God is punishing us for our sin and that bad things that happen to us are a sign of God's displeasure; therefore we must purge and distance ourselves, exclude, punish and cast out in order to keep ourselves clean.

The main problem with this line of thinking is that we never actually see it in Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God, the fullness of the deity – if you've seen him you've seen the Father. In fact, every time Jesus heals someone bound for years by sickness and affliction, or casts a demon out of an oppressed individual, or has table fellowship with pimps and prostitutes, he overturned the most common theology of his

day (and ours!) – that God is angry and punishing us for our sin. In Jesus we see the very presence of *God for us, not against us*. In Jesus we saw and see “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

So it comes as a bit of a surprise in Acts 1:6-8, after the apostles have been walking out this radical Kingdom life with Jesus toward the poor and marginalized for three years (though it has been toward the children of Israel), and then having it emphasized by the resurrected (!) Jesus for forty days, that the disciples ask this question, “Is now the time that you will make Israel great again?” (Or, “restore the kingdom to Israel?”). In other words, even after all they’ve seen, their thinking is still bound by the deep cultural beliefs of Messianic kingdom being for Israel.

With, what must be the utmost, resurrected patience, Jesus widens the lens for them that the Kingdom of God is global, not just local: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*

When God chose Abram in Genesis 12 to be the “father of many nations,” and God raised up Israel to be His people, it was always for them to be a blessing to the whole earth; not to be insular, Israel first. And now in Acts, the risen Jesus, the Image of the Invisible God, has made it clear to those who call him Lord, that the Kingdom mission is not about making Israel great again, or any other nation for that matter, but to expand the Kingdom of God, summed up in the mission and ministry of Jesus, to all the earth as it is in heaven.

It is easy to critique the disciples from a distance of two millennia and as a beneficiary of Jesus’ command to go *to the ends of the earth*. But it is clear from our present divisions that we are not so different. For the disciples, their small, nationalistic view of the kingdom as about making Israel great again, was so deeply engrained in their cultural psyche – as their religion and politics were so interwoven. While prophetic literature points to something so much larger than Israel, they were an oppressed, occupied people who longed for the good old days of the kingdom of their father, David, to be restored. And for all they had experienced with Jesus before and after the cross, they were still

Israelites first, and in their hearts and theology there was a deeply buried idolatry of allegiance to nation before their allegiance to the risen King and His Kingdom.

In fact, it ends up taking a great persecution coming against the church (Acts 8) to get them out of Jerusalem and into their calling to be empowered witnesses. It takes a vision from heaven and an angelic visitation along with Holy Spirit confirmation to break this deeply engrained box for Peter (Acts 10), which finally sets the church on the path *to the ends of the earth*.

Is there a point to all this? I seek to make a non-partisan point, but in our present political climate it ends up being very pointed. If we are going to call Jesus our Lord and base our following of him on his life mission, Kingdom teaching and this command in Acts 1 – those who call Jesus their Lord must question/challenge any and all “America first” policies (political, economic or religious) which seek to “restore the kingdom to America/make America great again.” These policies are evidenced through the neglect, penalization, oppression or exclusion of those who have been marginalized and/or oppressed by people in power, and by exclusion of the other, whether for the sake of economic consolidation or imagined safety or any other reason. That might be the kingdom of America, but it is not the Kingdom of God to whom we owe our allegiance.

Nations, by their nature, have borders and economic policies. The minute we start talking about the kingdom of Israel, we talk about borders and we are divided by insiders and outsiders; aliens and strangers versus members of the covenant of the promise. This determines who is welcomed and who is not; who is in and who is out.

But the Kingdom of God does not have borders. It is to the ends of the earth and Kingdom people must think this way, as well. To place nation above Kingdom is idolatry. To put political ideology above Kingdom of God is idolatry, no matter which political party you ascribe to. Even to “pledge allegiance to the flag” is idolatry – only King Jesus and His Kingdom are to receive our allegiance. Until we make the spiritual break with these idols (and it may take persecution or an angelic visitation

and vision), our vision of the Kingdom will always be nation blurred by these filters and we won't hear God clearly on these issues.

While nations rage and seek to make themselves great again, we will never be united on nationalistic economic and political policies. The only thing that will unite Jesus followers will be coming around the kingship of Jesus and his mission to be Kingdom witnesses to the places of power (Jerusalem), to the nation (Judea), to the racially and religiously marginalized (Samaria) and to the ends of the earth.