

Rev. Dr. Yugo Suzuki's Sermon

1/23/2011 **"Repent, the Kingdom of God Is at Hand" Matt. 4: 12-17**

In the beginning of his ministry, Jesus told his followers, "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand." There are two questions we need to answer. First, what is the Kingdom of God? Second, what does it mean to repent?

In order to understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God, we need to understand the social, political, and religious contexts in which the word was used.

In the first century Palestine, the Jewish people were forced to live under the reign of Caesar and Herod. Caesar was the emperor of the imperial Rome. Herod was the Jewish puppet king under Caesar. The world of the Jewish homeland in the first century was a two-tier domination system: the imperial domination system of Rome and the native Jewish domination system of King Herod.

Jews were forced to pay unreasonably heavy taxes to both Rome and Jerusalem. They were generally looked down upon by the Romans as primitive and uncouth. They had to endure sanctimonious preaching of religious leaders justifying the two-tier domination as the will of God. In such a social and political and religious situations, most people had given up hope.

To those people, Jesus came with a resounding message: God is not satisfied with the world marked by injustice, unfairness, and violence. He intends for people to live together in conditions that optimize the wellbeing of all.

The Kingdom of God summarized this message most clearly and concisely. Jesus was saying, "What would the world be like if God were king and not Herod or Caesar? In such a world, equality, not domination will prevail. In such a world, injustice will be replaced by justice.

This was what the prophets of the Old Testament had proclaimed long before Jesus: Amos' justice rolling down like waters is one example. Isaiah's the lamb lying down with the lion is another. His beating swords into plowshares is still another. What was new was that Jesus declared that he himself was the agent to bring in this kingdom.

But the kingdom of God is not available to those who kowtow to Herod and Caesar. We are to turn to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

This turning to Jesus from the conventional wisdom of the world is what it means to repent.

Put simply, to repent is to make up our minds once and for all to live compassionately as did Jesus. That is possible for us here and now individually and socially.

Of course, sinful and fallen, we will not be able to walk perfectly the path to the Kingdom of God. We may stumble. We may wander. But we can try our best. Try our best! That's all Jesus asks of us. He will take care of the rest.

"Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand." Yes, indeed! Yes, indeed!

Thanks be to God.