

The Kingdom of Heaven

by J.H. Newman

The sermon explores the doctrine of the Church, focusing on the role of St. Peter and the significance of the kingdom of heaven.

Scripture: Leviticus 19:17, Haggai 2:4, Matthew 16:18, Matthew 28:20, Revelation 22:19

Topics: "Church Doctrine", "Spiritual Restoration"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of understanding the doctrine of the Church through careful examination of Scripture, despite objections or preconceived notions. He emphasizes the need to consider the restoration of this doctrine and its impact on our spiritual system, shifting our perspective to view the Church as central. Newman encourages a deeper exploration of seemingly insignificant texts that may reveal important truths and lead to a truer understanding of the Church's role in our lives.

Transcript

In referring to Scripture for the proof of points relating to the doctrine of the Church, we sometimes find the force of our arguments evaded by the objection that, although the texts and passages we refer to seem to prove the points for which they are cited, we still appear to be giving them an undue prominence in our system. It is admitted, for instance, that the Epistles to Timothy and Titus prove an Episcopal form of Church government: that certain passages in the First Epistle to the Corinthians indicate the existence of a certain order of Church service, &c.; but then these passages are thought to occupy a subordinate place in the records of the New Testament, while our doctrine of the Church would put them prominently forward. This is, doubtless, a point to be well considered; for the apostolic rules of Scripture teaching and interpretation, must be faithfully observed: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God," or "prophesy," let him prophesy "according to the proportion (or analogy) of faith."

Now, to meet this difficulty, let it be considered that the restoration of a doctrine so evidently important in its bearings as that of the Church, must necessarily produce a great change upon a system out of which it has been lost. We have been accustomed to a Ptolemaic theory of our spiritual system; we have made our own little world the centre, and have ranged the doctrines of Scripture around it, according to the relation they seem severally to bear to our own individual profit. We find ourselves called upon to adopt an opposite theory; to take for the centre of our system a body which we had been used to regard as a mere satellite attending upon our own orb. No wonder if we feel our notions deranged; if every thing seems put into a new place; that which before was primary, now made subordinate; and vice versa. This is no more

than we might naturally expect: the only question for us to settle is this: does the theory which is proposed for our acceptance bring facts to support it? The maintainer of the Copernican theory, perhaps, directs our attention principally, or even exclusively, to objects which we had else comparatively neglected, or entirely overlooked. But this is no fatal objection to his views. The satellites of Jupiter might seem to hold a subordinate place in the solar system, and their eclipses to be comparatively uninteresting phenomena: and yet the examination of them led, we know, to great and important discoveries. Just so, some apparently insignificant text, lying in the depth of Scripture, far removed, as we think, from the centre light of Christian doctrine, may be the means of suggesting to us most important consideration,--of impressing upon us the conviction that we have been going upon a false theory, and leading us to a truer notion of the system in which we are placed. We do well, indeed, to weigh carefully the meaning of the texts which are brought before us, and to examine the deductions which are founded upon them, whether they follow naturally from the premises. But we do not well if we allow ourselves to be prejudiced against the evidence which is brought from Scripture, merely because it is contrary to our pre-conceived notions; because it seems to put us in a strange country, exalting the valleys, and making low the mountains and hills, turning Lebanon into a fruitful field, and causing the fruitful field to be counted, in comparison, as a forest. This is not to inquire after truth in the spirit of true philosophers, or, which is the same thing, of little children. And for such only is knowledge in store; "of such" only "is the kingdom of heaven."

For illustration of these remarks I would refer to the passages in St. Matthew's Gospel, which are first pressed upon our notice, when our attention is turned to the evidence of Scripture respecting the nature and office of the Christian Church. First and foremost, of course, is the well known promise to St. Peter, (chap. xvi. 18.) "Upon this rock will I build my Church." It is argued by the Churchman, that the obvious sense of the word Ekklesia (Assembly), as it would strike an unprejudiced reader, is that of a visible body; and that this sense is confirmed by the use of the term in chap. xviii. 17. Again, we are referred to the remarkable passage, (chap. xxiv. 45-51.) "Who then is that faithful and wise servant, whom his Lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season. Blessed is that servant whom his Lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing, : &c. It is asked, whether we do not find traces here of a line of ministry to continue in Christ's "Church" and "household" until His coming again. And we are bidden to compare with this passage that final promise of our Lord to His Apostles, with which the Gospel concludes, (chap. xxviii. 20.) "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," as confirming the proof of an uninterrupted succession of the Apostolical ministry. From these passages, then, put together, we seem to derive some idea of the Church as a Visible Spiritual Society, formed by Christ himself; a household over which He has appointed his servants to be stewards and rulers to the end. But then this view is drawn from what might seem a few insulated passages, occurring in a Gospel which we have been accustomed to look to for what we think more practical truths. And how do they affect us? We do not like to have our minds called off to such external relations. The interpretation offered us of these passages, seems, indeed, correct, and the argument grounded on them legitimate: but after all they are but a few scattered passages, referring to points which we consider of inferior importance, and not entitled to have so much stress laid upon them, or to be made foundations of a system.

But now, discarding prejudice and theory, let us calmly and teachably take up the Gospel of St. Matthew, in the hope, by diligently comparing of spiritual things with spiritual, to obtain an insight into its true meaning. Let us take the passage first referred to. The promise is made to St. Peter: it may be well, therefore, to look through the Gospel, and collect the scattered notices of this Apostle. We shall thus ascertain whether the promise would seem to have been made to St. Peter individually, as the Romanist would argue, or whether, as Churchmen in England would say, it was made to him as the representative

of the Apostolic body, and so the type of the Christian ministry. Or, on the other hand, we shall see whether the mention of St. Peter in this passage, and the prominent place which seems in it to be given him, stand so completely alone that it cannot be wrought into any thing like a regular system.

Now if we look carefully into St. Matthew's Gospel, we seem to find, throughout, a peculiar place occupied by St. Peter. In chap. xiv, we have the narrative of the strength and weakness of his faith, in walking on the water to go to Jesus; a circumstance not related by any other of the Evangelists. In the next chapter we find Peter asking for an explanation of our Saviour's "parable" respecting the things which defile a man, and the "blind leaders of the blind," who had been offended at the saying (xv. 15.). In chap. xvi. is the promise under our consideration, and the offense which so soon followed, and called down upon him his Master's displeasure. In chap. xvii. we have the store of the tribute money, and that discourse of our Lord with St. Peter which seems to have given rise to the disciples' question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Again, in chap. xviii, when our Lord has been explaining to his disciples how the offending brother is to be dealt with by "the Church," (ver. 17.) and has confirmed to them the solemn declaration before made to St. Peter, (which shows in what sense it was made in the first instance to St. Peter,) "Verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven," &c., we read, "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" In chap. xix. we find him anxiously inquiring of his Lord, what reward should be given to himself and his fellow-apostles, who had forsaken all and followed Him. The answer is the remarkable and solemn promise to the Twelve, which this Evangelist alone records in this place: "Verily, I say unto you, that ye which have followed me, in the regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Throughout St. Matthew's Gospel, St. Peter seems to be put forward in a very peculiar manner, of which, however, we are scarcely aware, until we compare the other Evangelists, and observe the difference between them in their selection and arrangement of the events they record. This is, however, too extensive a subject to enter upon at present. Our only object is to suggest the inquiry, whether there is not something more than casual in the prominent place which St. Peter occupies in St. Matthew's Gospel, and whether this peculiarity does not imply the existence of some deeper meaning than we should at first sight attach to several apparently insulated passages, in the centre of which stands the noble confession in the sixteenth chapter, and the gracious and glorious promise which was founded upon it.

In that promise, made by our Lord to St. Peter, it is said, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Here we find an expression which is of very common occurrence in St. Matthew, and peculiar to his Gospel: no other Evangelist employs the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven." Here again we shall do well to collect together the various passages in which the expression is used; and then we shall see that the doctrine of the Church and its Ministers, unfolded in the promise to St.

Peter, is no insulated and subordinate point in St. Matthew's Gospel. In the beginning of the Gospel we find the Baptist preaching and saying, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand;" and the ministry of our blessed Lord, taking up the Baptist's message, opens with the same announcement. "From that time (the time that John was cast into prison) Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (iv. 17.) We read of his going about all the synagogues of Galilee, "preaching the Gospel of the kingdom" (iv. 23.); and in His Sermon on the Mount we hear Him declaring who they are to whom that kingdom belongs, (v. 3, &c.)

"The kingdom of heaven" was to be a fulfilment of the earlier dispensation, the law and the prophets; "whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments," says our blessed Lord, "and shall

teach men so, the same shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." (v. 17-19.)

This, with other parallel passages, seems to give us a clue to the view of the Gospel dispensation as unfolded by St. Matthew. Our Lord appears in the character of a prophet, like Moses, raised up to be the Giver of a new law, and the Founder of a new Kingdom or Polity. The Scribes and Pharisees were corrupt expounders of the Divine law, they were unfaithful stewards of the mysteries of the kingdom: other servants were therefore to be chosen into their place, who should be the true "light of the world;" faithful rulers over God's household, giving to every one of their portion meat in due season.

The Scribes and Pharisees were to be deposed from Moses' seat; St. Peter and his fellow apostles were to be exalted in their room. They had "the keys of knowledge" committed to them, to open the kingdom of heaven unto men; but they had abused their trust, and they were to be deprived of their sacred office. Thus does our Lord pass sentence upon them: "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites: for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in."

And thus, in terms strictly corresponding, as it would appear, is their bishopric given for another to take: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona; and I say unto thee, that thou art Peter; and I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven. " The kingdom of heaven, of which the keys were thus taken away from the Scribes and Pharisees, and given to St. Peter and his brethren, was that everlasting kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world, which had been committed to the Son by the Almighty Father.

To Him of proper right it belongs; of Him alone it is properly said, that "He openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth." "The law and the prophets were until John," He himself declares: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." (Luke xvi. 16. Matt. xi. 12.) For the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins was then first preached to sinners.

The Son of Man had power on earth to forgive sins (ix. 6.); and He had also power to retain them: He was empowered to gather the wheat into his garner, and to burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (iii. 12.). But when, as the Messenger of the Covenant, He came, in fulfilment of prophecy, to visit His temple, and to punish the priests who had corrupted the covenant, and been partial in the law, He came, at the same time, to "purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver," that they might "offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness."

Let us bear this prophecy in mind when we turn to St. Matthew's Gospel, and let us see whether the long vista of God's dispensations in reference to his elder "church" and household, the covenant made with his ministers, the promises given to them, their unfaithfulness and corruption, will not throw a new light on many passages of the Gospel, which seemed before dark and uninteresting. We might, for instance, put side by side the discourses of our blessed Lord with the Pharisees, and those which He held with His own disciples; we might see the one cavilling against the truth, and laying snares for Him who came to try and prove them, until at length He gave them over to their blindness, and denounced a fearful catalogue of

woes upon their heads: we might watch the other, gradually weaned from prejudice and carnal-mindedness, instructed in "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," as they were able to learn them, until they were fit to be left alone in the world, with the Spirit of their departed Master to be with them to the end of their ministry, while they made disciples of all nations, and taught them to observe the things which he had commanded them.

We should then trace, with no careless feeling, in the sixteenth chapter, the lines of the Christian Church. When we see the faithless Pharisees, leagued with their bitterest enemies, to tempt the Great Prophet of the Church; when we hear Him affectionately reproving His own disciples for their want of faith; and warning them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees; when we then hear the solemn question put to the twelve, and the bold and undoubting answer of St.

Peter, we shall see a depth and fulness of meaning in our Saviour's blessing, which perhaps we never saw before, and feel that "blessed" indeed are we too, unto whom, through the covenant made with Simon, the son of Jonah, the blessed Chieftain of a blessed company, it has been revealed of the Father which is in heaven, that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Or, let us turn to the passage in the eighteenth chapter, in which the name of "the Church" occurs again, and the promise made to St. Peter is incidentally confirmed to the whole Apostolic body. Our Blessed Lord is there teaching His disciples how we are to deal with our brethren when they offend us, and how oft to forgive them. "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother; but if he will not hear thee, then take with thee two or three more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and as a publican. Verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." In this passage, taken by itself, we must understand by the term *ekklesia*, as has been observed, a visible body: but let us look at it again in its connection with the series of passages in which we have seemed to trace the idea of "the kingdom of heaven" as the fulfilment of that elder visible church, which was established by the ministry of Moses.

The repetition of the promise before made to St. Peter connects this passage closely with that in chap. xvi.; there the power of the keys was promised by our Lord; here the principles and rules are given for its exercise. For these our blessed Lord refers to the spirit of the Mosaic law. The first step to be taken towards an offending brother breathes the general spirit of the Mosaic law, and closely agrees with the injunction specially given, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy brother, and not suffer sin upon him" (Lev. xix. 17).

The next step is in exact fulfilment of the command in Deut. xvii. 6: "At the mouth of two witnesses or three witnesses shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness shall he shall not be put to death." And the final rejection of the brother that "will not hear the church," is in no less strict accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic denunciation: "And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest (that standeth to minister there before the Lord thy God), or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel" (Deut xvii. 12.).

The Christian "Church" seems thus to come into the place of the congregation of Israel; the Apostles, into the office of the Levitical priest and judge; and since their Master came to fulfil the law, they were to "do

and teach" that law in his spiritual meaning. Now "the end of the commandment is charity, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned; from which some have swerved," says the Apostle, "have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm." (1 Tim. i. 5-7).

This description of false apostles, the rivals of the true apostles of Christ, is equally applicable to those whom they were appointed to supersede. If we look to our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, we find how the Scribes "swerved" from the commandment in its true "end" and object; their explanations of the sixth and seventh commandments show how little they understood of the spirit of the law of love. In that Sermon Christ's disciples are instructed how they are to fulfil the commandments: they are now directed how, as faithful ministers of God's word, they are to "do and teach" them, viz. by governing the Church of God according to the spirit of true brotherly love.

Why had Levi been so grievously rebuked by the ministry of the last of the prophets? (Mal. ii. 1-9). Why was not "the offering of Judah and Jerusalem pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years?" (Mal. iii. 4. comp. ii. 13.) They had forgotten the brotherly covenant which bound Israel together as children of one earthly parent, and one Father in heaven, who had a care for his "little ones," and would not that one of them should perish. "Have we not all one Father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers?"

Judah hath dealt treacherously, covering the altar of God with tears, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good-will at your hand. (Mal. ii. 10-13). But, when the sons of Levi had been duly purified, that they might offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness--the true righteousness of the law, perfect brotherly love--then would the Lord again return to his temple, renew with Levi this "covenant of life and peace," and bless the sacred service of his holy congregation.

"Verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven," &c. Again, "I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree as touching any thing that they shall ask on earth, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Can we doubt the meaning of this solemn promise? and is it not full of comfort to faithful members of Christ's holy catholic and apostolic church?

Does it not teach us, that upon us truly "the ends of the world are come;" that we are the children of a long line of spiritual ancestry, the heirs, highly blessed and favoured indeed, of a rich and glorious inheritance?

It would be easy to follow out, to an almost indefinite extent, the line of illustration, of which a few points have been traced. Other similar lines might also be drawn, throwing much light upon separate passages of the same Gospel; as, for instance, the comparison of "the kingdom of heaven" to a householder, which might be traced through many parables, &c. throwing light upon the remarkable passage already referred to in the twenty-fourth chapter. Or again, in illustration of the fearful outline, which is there set before us, of the misconduct and punishment of the "wicked servant," we might draw out the intimations, which our Lord's words, on several occasions, give us, of unfaithful ministers and stewards, who were in after days to abuse the power committed to them, to lord it over their fellow servants, to eat and drink and to be drunken: or, still further, we might borrow from the condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees a fearful light on the character of the "hypocrites," with whom his portion is assigned.

But enough, perhaps, has been said for our present purpose, which has been, not to urge for exclusive adoption a particular interpretation of certain passages, nor even to recommend any particular idea as supplying the only clue to their meaning; but simply to meet an objection, which it is believed, indisposes the minds of many thoughtful readers of Holy Scripture to receiving the evidence which is drawn from its records, in support of the doctrine of "the Church." To such persons it is here suggested, that their difficulty arises from prejudice in favour of a particular theory.

Scripture may be viewed from other points than that which they have chosen: and the theory which a different view suggests may perhaps be found to explain more phenomena, and unfold deeper mysteries, than theirs. The expression, or incident, or agreement, which they overlook, and cast aside, may, to another, serve as a clue to a mysterious volume, and give "thoughts which do often lie too deep for tears." Only let not persons be startled and offended at finding truths in Scripture which they had entirely overlooked, or thought practically unimportant, assuming a prominent place in the system which is recommended to their consideration.

This must be the case at first. If the interpretation given of a passage of Scripture seems agreeable to the natural sense of the words, to the context, or to other parts of Scripture; if it seems to give more meaning to passages or portions than they had in our eyes before; let this be enough for us for the present: let us thankfully admit it, not lightly or hastily starting objections, or caring for its effect upon our pre-conceived opinions. "Every word of God is pure" (Prov. xxx. 5); and if we are bidden not to "add to His words," lest He reprove us, and we be found liars (v. 6); we are also warned, in the most mysterious, and to many readers, apparently unpractical, book of the New Testament, "If any man shall take away from the words of the prophecy of this book, God shall take away his part out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." (Rev. xxii. 19.)

Surely we may incur the risk of thus taking away from the words of prophecy, without literally mangling its sacred page. We may settle with ourselves, that it is an external matter, and not important to our individual interests. Rather let us humbly receive the very crumbs which fall from the Master's table, "laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies and envies, and all evil speakings, if so be we have tasted that the Lord is gracious." (1 Pet. ii. 1. 3.) The scattered limbs of sacred truth, which are presented to our view, may seem to us at first sight like the dry bones, which the prophet saw in the vision: but the word of prophecy may yet bring them together, may cover them with sinew, and flesh, and skin, and fill them with a living spirit; the breath from the four winds may breathe upon the slain, and they may "stand up" upon their feet, before our eyes, "an exceeding great army."

"And when this cometh to pass, then shall they know that there hath been a prophet among them:" "for I have poured out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord God." Wherefore, "now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord God: and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech the high priest, and be strong all ye people of the land, and work, for I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts. According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt so my Spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not." (Haggai ii. 4, 5.) "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

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