



Jesus's core message was that God's long-awaited kingdom was now arriving. Some people who heard his message thought that he intended to raise an army to expel the Romans. However, his goal was not Israel's political independence, but the liberation of the entire world from all evil. According to a collection of Jesus's teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount (found in the Gospel of St Matthew in the New Testament), Jesus announced that God's kingdom now held sway over both heaven and earth, and that under this new rule the distorted values of human kingdoms would be overturned. God's kingdom, he said, belonged not to the greedy, the self-assured, and the warriors, but to the poor, the meek, and the peacemakers.

#### All are welcome

Jesus's message was manifested in his actions. Centuries earlier, the Jewish prophet Isaiah had said that when God's kingdom came, there would be wonderful miracles of healing: the blind would be able to see, and the deaf able to hear that

God was now king, and the lame would jump for joy. The biblical accounts of Jesus's ministry are full of stories of healings just like these. In addition, Jesus said there was no longer any barrier to entering God's kingdom. Until that time, the Jewish faith had viewed non-Jews as beyond salvation, along with those people who failed to adhere to God's laws ("sinners"), but Jesus said that even these groups would be welcomed into the kingdom. Jesus demonstrated the forgiveness of sinners by sharing meals – one of the most intimate and meaningful of Jewish activities – with social outcasts and religious renegades. The future was likened to a banquet prepared by God, to which people from all over the world would be invited.

But people were confused: wasn't the kingdom of God supposed to be the climax of world history? If so, why did the world not end with Jesus's announcement? The answer that Jesus gave them was that the kingdom would not arrive all at once, as most people had expected. In one of his many

**Jesus's miracles**, such as the healing of the blind, affirmed that, just as Jesus went among the poor and the outcast, so God invited everyone, regardless of status, into his kingdom.

parables (stories used to illustrate his message) he compared God's kingdom to the yeast in a batch of dough. In another, he described the kingdom as acting like seeds sown in the ground. Both yeast and seeds take time to produce results, growing almost imperceptibly, but are slowly and surely at work.

#### A new religion

Jesus invited those who heard him to allow God's kingdom and its values into their own lives without delay. He taught that the kingdom of God is both now, and not yet, here, that it has begun and continues to grow whenever people choose to live by the rule of God, embracing his values and experiencing healing and forgiveness. However, Jesus also acknowledged that there would be a future moment when, at the climactic end of the present world order, God's rule would triumph over all other kingdoms. When this day of judgment arrived, it would be too late to decide to be part of

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Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Jesus (Matthew 5:3)

**How can the end have a beginning?** Jesus said that the final replacement of our present world with the kingdom of God would be delayed, giving people time to secure themselves a place in that kingdom by believing in him.



God's new world. This gave his message a note of urgency. People needed to make a decision now; far from being a distant dream, the end had already begun.

The idea that Jesus marked the "beginning of the end" led directly to the separation of Christianity from its Jewish roots. The early followers of Jesus claimed that they no longer had to wait to discover who God's Messiah would be, because Jesus was that Messiah – the one God had appointed to bring his kingdom to earth. However, Jesus's opponents refused to believe this and decided to silence him by killing him. When Jesus's followers did not give up their beliefs even after Jesus died, and in fact enlarged on them – by claiming that God had confounded Jesus's opponents by raising him from the dead – it became clear that their faith, led by a figure who could not be conquered by death, was something new and distinct within the catalogue of religions.

From the earliest days, Christianity has been defined by the conviction that Jesus's ministry was the beginning of the end. One of the key prayers of Christianity,

the Lord's Prayer, taught by Jesus himself, asks that God's kingdom come on earth "as it is in heaven." In offering this prayer, Christians are asking for the earthly advent of God's kingdom now, even as they wait for it to arrive in fullness at the end of present world history.

#### God's kingdom today

Historically, the Christian church has sometimes understood the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven" as a purely spiritual realm that leaves the physical world unaffected. But in the early 20th century, New Testament scholars began to take a new interest in the Jewish context of Jesus's ministry, and since then Jesus's message about the kingdom of God has had an especially prominent place in Christian theology. By paying closer attention to the background of Jesus's original message, the political and economic implications of the arrival of God's kingdom have become clearer. Christians now believe that the kingdom occurs wherever present reality and its values are transformed by the rule of God, a belief that has inspired many Christians to

champion movements for social change; for example, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the United States, Gustavo Gutiérrez and the liberation of the poor in South America, and Desmond Tutu and the end of apartheid in South Africa.

#### The end of all things

The idea that Jesus's ministry marked the "beginning of the end" is known in theology by the term "inaugurated eschatology". Eschatology is a word that itself evolved from two Greek words meaning "last" and "study", and it refers to the study of the end of things, or the end of all things – the end of the world. To Christians, Jesus's message about God's kingdom gives Christianity an inaugurated eschatology: the end of all things was inaugurated (begun but not completed) by his message. The fact that the presence of God's kingdom today in the lives of Christians can still only be called the beginning of the end is a reminder that the Christian faith still looks towards a final, definitive action by God. ■

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The time is fulfilled.  
God's kingdom is arriving! Turn around and believe the good news.  
Jesus (Mark 1:15)