

Kingdom come: Psalm 22:25-31; John 15:1-8

by [Andrew Warner](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

A strange king is likely to have a strange kingdom, and the kingdom of Jesus is no exception. One glimpse of Jesus' kingdom reveals a crazy diversity of peoples feasting, worshiping and struggling together.

Jesus gave a more nuanced image of the kingdom during his farewell conversation with the disciples. "I am the vine and you are the branches." Now we see an image of a multilateral community, one in which each member is interwoven with the other. Within this community there is much "abiding"; Jesus abides in the disciples and the disciples abide in him. There is also a constant "pruning" by God to pare away those traits and qualities that interfere with kingdom building and to strengthen traits that ensure the health of the community. The result, perhaps, is a sense that the kingdom of Christ is marked by a deep mutual love and an ongoing push to ever greater love.

An analogous image of the kingdom comes to us in Psalm 22, where we hear that "dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations." That rule becomes explicit in verses which speak of the poor eating until they are satisfied, and even the dead joining in the celebration. John Calvin included the less historically accurate but morally compelling line, "All the fat ones of the earth shall eat and worship." These fat ones will not eat, however, until after the poor ones are satisfied, a direct inversion of our world today. This kingdom of God is a strange place.

Calvin also said, "Now if God, under the law, joined the full with the hungry, the noble with the mean, the happy with the wretched, much more ought this to take place at the present day under the gospel." We might make the same observation about the vineyard image: since God seeks a multilateral community of mutual love, we ought to live this way in our present day.

The difficulty is not in the image of community; nearly everyone will embrace the idea of a peaceful community. The stumbling point is not the sweetness of abiding together. Our trouble comes with the necessity of confronting those situations in which community is broken, or worse, in which human beings are attacking other

human beings. What are the international implications of these readings?

In our global village, America is at war. An international debate about how one can create a more peaceful world among diverse peoples is raging. America went to war claiming that Saddam Hussein's government posed a threat to Iraq's neighbors, to the Iraqis themselves and to America. There was evidence that Saddam used chemical and biological weapons, and exiles told disturbing stories of their treatment in Iraqi prisons. What remained uncertain was how to deal with Saddam.

In *Of Paradise and Power*, Robert Kagan imagines America and Europe tracing out two lines of Enlightenment thought. The Americans have responded with a call to war, assuming that the world is Hobbesian: nasty and brutish, with international law short-lived. This approach assumes that cultivating a more peaceful world requires the exercise of power, especially military power. Meanwhile, the Europeans have taken a Kantian approach: international peace depends on moving beyond power politics to the rule of law, negotiated change and, above all, cooperation. The church too wonders which of these approaches—the Hobbesian or the Kantian, the Pentagon powers or the Turtle Bay processes—will best nourish the international community.

My congregation has lambasted the American use of military power to establish peace. They ask how any child of God could be called a "target of opportunity," and they hear the cries of those who are "collateral damage." Our reading of the gospel suggests that Jesus abides with the scared residents of Baghdad as much as he does with the soldiers invading the city.

Yet the European answer seems equally suspect. Too often the insistence on the rule of law, negotiation and cooperation has failed to deal with horrible crimes, especially genocide. Too often abhorring military power leads to ignoring the powerless, as it did in Rwanda. Bosnia and Kosovo were saved not by negotiation but by an exercise of military power that ended genocidal campaigns. There are times when compassion might demand military action.

Jesus holds up the image of a kingdom where life is marked by a mutual love, a deep abiding with the other and a constant struggle to ever greater care. I cannot see this vision without praying, "Thy kingdom come!" I know, like Calvin, that what God ordained ought to be here on earth: the thin ones and the fat ones feasting together. And this gives me a vision of our world as a multilateral international community

where famine in Africa, genocide in Europe and oppression in Asia are deeply felt in America because we abide in each other.

While the vision of the kingdom of God may be simple, there are no simple ways to achieve it or even make our world more like it. A military intervention in Rwanda might have stopped the killing of a million people in a hundred days. A military intervention in North Korea might hasten the killing of millions. Our task is to choose prayerfully and carefully that we might cultivate the kingdom, and not delay its arrival.