

Setting Wise Priorities

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

Kingdom of God From its earliest days in 17th century England, the Religious Society of Friends has sought to help people to seek truth and know God -- both individually and collectively -- through attentive listening worship, disciplined study, and obedient service. As they progressed in friendship with God through those avenues, Friends' understanding increased regarding God's character, values, and purposes. They sought to live in faithful agreement and cooperation with what they understood to be God's desires and intentions for all things -- a way of living Jesus often called the kingdom of God.

•One simple definition for the kingdom of God is “the condition of life where God is king, the highest authority, fully in charge; the life or situation in which God’s intentions are fully embraced and honored.” What is your definition of “the kingdom of God”?

*•What did Jesus teach about God’s kingdom in these Bible passages?
Matthew 10:7 Mark 12:34 Luke 17:21 John 18:36*

God's Righteousness From their study of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Friends understood that a lifelong commitment to allowing God to be king of every aspect of their lives needed to be their highest priority (6:33). Their lives included all sorts of associations and involvements in society. They felt compelled to let those engagements become opportunities to move the world in the direction of increased agreement with God's character and desires.

•What is “God’s righteousness” to which Jesus refers in Matthew 6:33? Is it compliance with the Law, or with humans’ rules (see Matthew 5:20)? Might it refer more to “rightness,” to consistency with God’s character and intentions, and to the orderliness which that manner of living can bring to those who seek it as their first priority?

Corporate Seeking Friends who began living with God's kingdom and righteousness as their highest priority found solidarity and common cause with others who made that same choice. They discovered that in worshipping and seeking truth together, they often were led by

God's Spirit to collaborative action that tangibly expressed God's kingdom and rightness into a world that did not operate by its values.

There was clear New Testament precedent for that sort of corporate seeking and obeying of God's leading. In Acts 13:2-3, the Christians at Antioch discerned in gathered worship God's desire for Paul and Barnabas to be sent out in ministry to locations and peoples not previously considered open to the gospel. When their welcome of Gentiles into the way of Jesus stirred up violent opposition, the leadership of the early Church gathered in Jerusalem, listened to all sides of the issue, and in worship together discerned spiritual leading that enabled them to write “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” to stop requiring Jewish rituals and to avoid any hint of idolatry or selfish sexual misbehavior (Acts 15:28).

FCNL aspires to do its work in the same spirit as those early Christians and early Quakers. For many years, Friends Committee on National Legislation has asked Friends groups across the country to gather in worshipful consideration of the best ways to help people and the world by addressing societal conditions and public policies that are inconsistent with truth as Friends understand it. In that context of worship, they are asked to discern a short list of concerns which should be high priorities for people who wish to move living conditions (and the federal policies that shape them) in the direction of increased agreement with God's character, values, and intentions.

New Heavens, New Earth Seven hundred years before Jesus' birth, at a time of national crisis and disgrace in Israel, the prophet Isaiah was given a hopeful glimpse (Isaiah 65:17-25) of the “new heavens and new earth” whose establishment would begin when the promised Messiah arrived. It was a vision of the world renewed to function according to God's character and desires. It is the world the people of God are called to seek.

•What would the world be like if God was fully in charge, if God’s values were fully embraced and God’s intentions fully expressed?

•What themes can you identify in Isaiah 65:17-25 that are consistently found throughout the Old and New Testaments regarding such a world?

Seeking

A World Free of War and the Threat of War

The Vision In Isaiah's vision of the new heavens and new earth that would be made possible by God's promised Deliverer (Isaiah 65:17-25), the prophet saw an image of wolves and lambs feeding together peacefully, of the feared lion eating plants instead of flesh. It was an echo of insights Isaiah had received and recorded earlier in his prophetic writings (Isaiah 2:3-5; 11:6-9), a vision of an end of violence and killing. It described a world of *shalom*, of mutual concern, wholeness, and adequate provision that made violence unnecessary and counterproductive. *Shalom* meant that instruments of war could be recycled into agricultural tools, and that going forward, Israel's resources could be applied to constructive ends rather than destructive ones. It meant that lives and treasure would no longer need to be tied up in training armies for coercion and retaliation, and in perfecting ever more proficient means of harming other people. Isaiah's prophetic contemporary Micah recorded a similar message (Micah 4:2-4) and added that in Messiah's kingdom of *shalom*, the people of God would cease acting out of fear because of their confidence in God's protection and ways. Isaiah wrote (11:9) that such a world free of violence and killing would be possible because that world would be "full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."

- *In Isaiah's writings, what or where is "all My holy mountain" where harming and killing will end?*
- *How should we understand this message of these prophets, knowing that the Old Testament is filled with stories of war, violence, and conquest seemingly instructed or orchestrated by God?*
- *The words of another Old Testament prophet (Joel 3:10) often are cited as contradicting Isaiah and Micah, and to justify military weapons and preparations. How should Joel's words be understood?*
- *What other Old Testament stories or passages do you know that support the view that movement towards the kingdom of God is progress towards a world free of war and the threat of war?*

The Lived Reality When Jesus finally arrived about 700 years later, his public message consistently conveyed his understanding of

God's kingdom as one of *shalom* where violence and coercion were unnecessary and counterproductive. Early in his teaching ministry, he incorporated peacemaking into his progression of blessedness known as the Beatitudes, recorded by Matthew (5:9) at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Later in that sermon, Jesus told his audience that their interpretation of the Law's allowance of reciprocal retaliation ("eye for eye, tooth for tooth") had missed God's intention. Rather, God desires his people to negate violence and transform enemies into friends through chosen suffering, sacrificial servanthood, and prayerful love towards adversaries (Matthew 5:38-48).

The apostle Paul, the New Testament's most prolific writer, taught that same message in his lengthy letter to the Christians in Rome, the military capital of the world in the first century AD. He instructs them (Romans 12:14-21) to bless their persecutors, never to take revenge or repay evil for evil, and as fully as possible to live at peace with all people. They were to overcome evil with good by feeding and giving drink to their hungry, thirsty enemies. Paul stresses that living in God's kingdom means living peaceably (within the boundaries of love) with governing authorities God has allowed in the world for maintaining civil order. For Christ's followers, however, that cooperation ends when government requires that they support harming their neighbor (Romans 13:9,10).

- *In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus defined "neighbor" for his disciples in terms that included even their historic adversaries. Are there any human beings who are not our neighbors, any whom love allows to be harmed?*
- *Friends often speak of "that of God in every person." In a parable regarding the way God evaluates human behavior, Jesus told his disciples that whatever they had done to or for other people, even "the least of them," they had treated God the same (Matthew 25:37-45). What are implications of that truth for policies of violence and war?*
- *In James 3:17 - 4:3, Jesus' half-brother offers insights as to why the world is not free of war and the threat of war. If he is correct, upon what might modern peacemakers best focus their energies?*
- *Jesus' disciple Peter (who once removed an adversary's ear with a sword) later wrote that Jesus' example of nonviolence was the life to which his followers were called (I Peter 2:21-23). How might that help move the world towards an end of war and the threat of war?*

Seeking A Society With Equity and Justice for All

Friends' conviction that there is "that of God in every person" must be more than just a deterrent to violence and war. If all are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and God is present in some capacity in everyone we meet, then to treat any person as less than human or less than equally deserving of basic justice and human dignity is to deny and mistreat that of God in them (Matthew 25:45).

Law and Prophets From the initial giving of the Law to Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 22:21,22; Exodus 23:1-9), their instruction for living in a diverse, difficult world was never to forget their own immigrant history, never to mistreat aliens or take advantage of the weak and marginalized. About 700 years later when the prophets began detailing the reasons for the failures of the Israelite and Judean monarchies, their messages were filled with indictments of both kingdoms for failing to maintain societies of economic, legal, and social justice that were consistent with the character and instructions of Jehovah (e.g., Jeremiah 22:2,3; Amos 2:6,7 and 5:7-15, 23,24; Micah 6:8-12).

Jesus Right from the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus presented God's desire for equity and justice in human relationships using terms everyone could understand. Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in a brief passage (Matthew 7:12-14) that has become known as the "golden rule," he taught that people should treat others in the same manner, with the same respect and dignity, as they would expect and like to be treated themselves. His frequent citation of the "two greatest commandments" (Deut. 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18) and his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) clearly placed the right treatment of other human persons on the same plane with the right worship of God.

The Early Church In the months and years following Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, his disciples preached and evangelized faithfully despite significant opposition from the religious establishment. As the number of his followers increased steadily in and around Jerusalem, opposition sometimes took the form of extra economic oppression added to harsh conditions imposed by the Roman occupiers. The Christ-followers had to share resources among themselves to make sure everyone got food. In that situation of scarcity, their poorest members who were native Judeans began getting treated more favorably

than did those who had migrated to Jerusalem from other parts of the Hellenistic world. When the disciples learned of the problem, they took immediate organizational steps to restore equity (Acts 6:1-6).

Their understanding of equity was stretched further when Peter received a vision challenging his assumption that Gentiles were unacceptable to God (Acts 10:9-48). His ensuing encounter with Cornelius' household showed him conclusively that God's Spirit was available to all "who fear God and do what is right."

After similar experiences during his missionary travels, the apostle Paul confirmed Peter's leading. In Galatians 3:26-29 and Colossians 3:11, he wrote that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,.....barbarian nor Scythian, but Christ is all and is in all."

•What are the 21st century situations of economic injustice about which the prophets likely would be most concerned, or that should concern Friends most deeply?

The situations of legal injustice?

The situations of social injustice?

•Are you aware of other kinds of injustice identified and addressed in scripture? What are they?

•Is there a place of balance, of truth and grace, for dealing with immigration that has violated laws?

•How should the call to unselfish, Christ-like living and the instruction to "consider others better than yourselves" and to "look not only to your interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3,4) shape our response to injustice in the world?

•James writes pointedly of the way even religious people and institutions participate in economic discrimination (James 2:1-4). Does that still happen today? Does its opposite ever happen (ref. Exodus 23:3)?

Seeking A Community Where Every Person's Potential May Be Fulfilled

Isaiah's vision of the new heavens and new earth (Isaiah 65:17-25) was a glimpse of God's kingdom of *shalom* where war, violence, and fear had no place. It is useful to look closely at the conditions that *were* seen in that kingdom where God is fully in charge. They are the things in which God desires his people to invest themselves, the life conditions that make war and violence not just unnecessary but counterproductive.

Jerusalem a Delight, Its People a Joy This phrase in Isaiah's vision almost certainly refers not to a specific place, city, or nationality, but to all the places where the people dwell who look to God as their king. It looks ahead to a community of faith that has learned to live in harmonious relationships with one another and becomes a source of blessing even to those outside their recognized membership. God's people invest themselves in things that lessen suffering and sorrow, that make the world a more wholesome place, that increase opportunities for meaningful life and oppose the forces of death. By their trust in God, their attentiveness to the kingdom's values, and their cooperation with God's intentions for the material world, they live wisely and welcome others to do the same.

That manner of living decreases unnecessary stress and the waste of resources, leaving God's people healthy and energized to share divine love with the world around them. They give tangible expression to God's desire that "they will neither harm nor kill on all My holy mountain" by working to assure that the basic needs of all people, especially the poor and marginalized, are adequately supplied. They do whatever they can to help others be healthy, have adequate housing and food, and live in security. They work to make the world safer and healthier for children. Through their efforts and investments, they seek to make meaningful employment available for all who need it. They also work to protect and use agricultural land and other natural resources in sustainable ways consistent with God's renewal of the earth. By their positive impact on others as they seek God's intentions in all aspects of life, God's people share the gift of hope.

• *What aspects of life in our time reflect progress towards the new earth Isaiah saw?*

• *In what areas is there still important work to be done?*

• *What kinds of public policy would best advance those aspirations?*

Jesus' Ministry During his years of earthly ministry, Jesus displayed concern "for the whole person" in his encounters with people needing help. He often brought healing to the sick and restoration to the handicapped. On other occasions he miraculously provided food to those who had none. In studying those accounts, some people suggest that the miracle even greater than the instantaneous creation of food may have been Jesus' persuasion of people who had some to share it unselfishly with those who did not (Matthew 14:13-21). He welcomed and related to people from blue collar and white collar occupations. He taught using simple, understandable terms and illustrations from his listeners' lives. He valued friendship with children and paid attention to their needs. He sometimes alarmed onlookers by stretching cultural norms to engage and show concern for people deemed off-limits, "untouchable," or unseemly.

• *In what other ways did Jesus demonstrate his commitment to building a community where every person's potential may be fulfilled?*

The Church Luke records in Acts 2:44,45 and Acts 4:32-35 that the fellowship of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem made sure that the practical needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ were adequately met. They met together in homes, shared what they had learned with one another, shared food, prayed for one another, and provided vital companionship when much of the world was rejecting them. Those who had material and financial resources readily shared them with others in the fellowship who were in need. (Some early Friends referred to that way of living as "watching over one another for good.")

• *Consider the contrast between the church of Acts 2 and 4 and Jesus' encounter with the rich young man who had kept the written commandments but trusted his wealth more than he trusted God (Luke 12:13-21). Which way of life has the best chance of building the community where every person's potential may be fulfilled?*

Seeking An Earth Restored

The creation waits in eager expectation....in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

(Romans 8:19-22)

An Earth Exploited People who have flown in outer space, those who have explored the deepest recesses of the oceans, and those who have experienced parts of the planet in between with even a minimum of attentiveness and humility all testify with the Psalmist (Psalm 19:1-6) to the beauty and complex splendor of the earth we inhabit and its ecosystems that sustain us. For centuries, the earth's natural abundance seemed more than adequate -- inexhaustible even -- to support its human population. In recent times, however, science has helped us begin to understand the limits of earth's resources in the face of our increased numbers, our expanded and accelerated capabilities for consumption, and our seemingly unrestrained appetites.

In the Law of Moses, it was stressed to the Israelites en route to the Promised Land that the territory they would inhabit belonged to the Lord, not to them (Leviticus 25:23), a truth that was to guide their treatment of the land and of one another. Years later, that principle was affirmed by the Psalmist when he wrote, *The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters* (Psalm 24:1,2).

If the earth truly is a masterpiece belonging to God, and if the scientific findings are accurate regarding human-caused damage to the atmosphere, land, and seas, then humanity's stewardship of its planetary home probably does not rate very highly.

• **Many people point to Genesis 1:28, God's instruction to Adam and Eve in the creation narrative to "fill the earth and subdue it" (in some translations to "exercise dominion over it"), as justification for using natural resources for personal enrichment, ease, and pleasure. What were those words intended to communicate?**

• **Imagine that you were a top-selling artist who gave your valuable paintings to your best friends. How would you feel if you went to visit a friend and found your painting being used as a doormat? Does humankind's mistreatment of the earth show contempt for God?**

Personal Values, Character Jesus' disciple Peter makes it clear that the spiritual life is a commitment to be like Christ (I Peter 2:21). Jesus taught the disciples that his life and kingdom were based on constructive, life-increasing values, in contrast to his adversary's intention to steal, harm, and destroy (John 10:10). In the passage often referred to as "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22), the apostle Paul writes that one of the qualities consistently produced within people in whom Christ resides is self-control, a trait that tempers harmful, selfish consumption. Paul tells the Church at Philippi that his broad experience in mission had taught him that he could trust God to provide everything he needed for the life God called him to live (Philippians 4:12,19), a principle Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:8,25-32). His followers would be marked by meekness that inherits and treasures the earth as a gift from God (Matthew 5:5), not by a mentality of entitlement that claims the right selfishly to exploit it.

• ***If those are the values and traits of Christ's followers, then how would one expect them to treat the environment and natural world?***

• ***What sort of public policies concerning the environment and natural resources would one expect such people to support?***

Common Good Clear back to the Old Covenant, the instruction to God's people was that they love neighbor as self (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus affirmed that by teaching his disciples to treat others as well as they expected to be treated (Luke 6:31), and that no one was not their neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). Paul frequently stressed to early Christians the importance of considering and serving the needs of other people, not just their own (Romans 12:10, I Corinthians 10:24, Philippians 2:3,4).

• ***If people took those instructions to heart, how would they think and act regarding polluting the air others breathe, the water others drink?***

• ***How would they likely feel about consuming so much of an essential resource that it left far too little for their neighbors to have an adequate supply, or made what was available unaffordable to everyone but the wealthy?***

• ***For what kinds of public policies would such people work, to ensure equitable and sustainable use of resources for both current and future residents of earth?***

Speaking Truth to Government

Throughout biblical history, there were times when individuals who listened to God were sent to convey God's desires and priorities to society's leaders who were missing, ignoring, or resisting divine leading. During the period of Israel's and Judah's monarchies, the prophets often spoke or wrote to call on their kings to rule with justice and faithfulness to God's intentions. New Testament Christians were instructed both to speak and to live prophetically as a way of challenging authorities to do what was right.

Old Testament In I Kings 17-19, God sent the prophet Elijah to challenge Israel's king Ahab over his idolatrous, unjust reign. God's word to Ahab was that a devastating drought would beset the country and ruin its economy, so long as the king did not change his ways. Elijah's message proved true, making him so unpopular in the king's court that when Elijah resurfaced there after hiding for about three years, Ahab's greeting was, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" (I Kings 18:16-18)

A similar story is told in 2 Samuel 11-12. The prophet Nathan was sent by God to speak uncomfortable truth to the popular and powerful King David regarding his predatory adultery with a subordinate's wife, and the subsequent deadly cover-up.

New Testament Writing to persecuted Christians living in Rome, the capital of the world's ruling power, the apostle Paul instructed them to live as good, law-abiding citizens, and to submit to their established leaders -- up to the limit of love (Romans 13:1-7). So long as government served its role of maintaining order and serving the well-being of its citizens, Jesus' followers were to cooperate with civil leaders. If, however, government required of them conduct that violated love or harmed people, then they were to obey the One whose authority is far above any political or social power. In addition, they were to be ready to accept whatever consequences their noncompliance brought, as a prophetic witness to truth that is greater than ideology.

Peter instructs his readers similarly in I Peter 2:11-20. He stressed that as they cooperate with civil authorities while living first as servants of God, "it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men." He assured them that their exemplary lives would ultimately result in praise to God, even from their opponents.

- *In the current situation, what are ways that Christ's followers should be cooperating and working with civil authorities for the good of nation and community?*
- *In what areas should Christ's followers be calling upon government to more fully embrace truth and justice?*
- *In biblical situations where God's messengers conveyed truth to ruling authorities, what spiritual preparation and substance was essential to their calling and mission? Are those factors still important to such work in our time? How are those assets obtained?*