

## THE MESSAGE AND MISSION OF JESUS

### TO THE JEWS FIRST....

Jesus' teaching on the reign of God shows that God is the center of his thought. People do not have to do something first in order to receive God's gifts, nor is God under an obligation to reckon up a person's precise merits and reward them accordingly. Jesus declares war on piety of that kind. God is the only actor who really matters. The "kingdom of God" or "reign of God", therefore, does not mean a merely static condition but God's dynamic action also. The reign of God is a reality opposed to the present age and signifies that the dominion of Satan is ended (Luke 11:20; Matthew 12:28).

The reign and kingdom of God is the theme of many of Jesus' parables. The parables of growth show that the reign can only be brought about by God, but that he will bring it about despite all obstacles (Mark 4:26-29, 30-32; Matthew 13:33). People cannot bring about the kingdom of God by force or by their own achievements. The kingdom of God is the action and gift of God alone.

Jesus regarded the essentially futuristic reign of God as extending into the present through his coming and as particularly manifest in his casting out of demons and miracles. The nearness of God's reign determines the uncompromising demand for immediate conversion

The call for conversion, inspired by the nearness of the reign of God, leads to an intensification of the demands of the Law and also to the suppression of certain precepts that misrepresent the genuine will of God. Among the precepts that are made more radical are the prohibition of divorce (Luke 16:18; Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 5:31), the honest observance of the fourth commandment (Mark 7:10-13), the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-42), and the unqualified requirement of love of enemies (Matthew 5:43ff).

Jesus is not concerned about literal fidelity in the fulfillment of a precept but about the will of God himself. Consequently, he directly attacks the Law where that will was concealed by the "hedge about the Law". This is particularly clear in the disputes about the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6). The insistence on the true will of God stands in direct connection with the message of the immanent coming of the reign of God. Jesus knows that he is a voice calling at the last hour. Consequently, he lays down no law with detailed prescriptions but demands penance and conversion to God himself (Mark 1:15).

Because the reign of God comes solely by God's power and grace, a person can only pray for it ("thy kingdom come") and recognize the present as a sign calling for conversion (Luke 15:54-59; 10:23); it is now that the uncompromising decision for or against Jesus must be made.

The saying about confessing and denying (Luke 12:8ff) shows that the positive and negative response to Jesus' message and person is decisive for membership in the final community of salvation. Anyone who accepts Jesus' message now, i.e. fulfills God's will to salvation and holiness now in the radical way proposed by Jesus, has qualified as an heir to the promises. The kingdom and reign of God is the absolutely sovereign and freely offered gift of God's grace to his chosen people.

The expectation of the immanent coming of the reign of God also inspires Jesus' endeavor to prepare the whole of Israel to inherit salvation. Jesus regards the empirical Israel of his time as the chosen people of God. That is, in accordance with the history of revelation, he respects the prior claim of the people of Israel as the bearer of the promise of salvation. Consequently, Jesus restricted to Israel his own work and later that of his disciples who were cooperating in his own mission (Matthew 10:5ff; 15:24ff). All the more weight attaches to the cures of pagans, which are reported as exceptions (Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30).

The summons to the whole of Israel finds expression in characteristic features of his preaching. A first typical feature is that there is no trace of flight or separation from the world. Jesus sought public places in order to reach all Israelites with his message. Jesus did not want to gather together the holy remnant and separate the pious from the sinners. For Jesus, all Israel is a scattered flock (Micah 5:3; Matthew 9:36; 10:6). God shows his goodness by his not excluding even sinners and outcasts (Luke 15), and so Jesus also converses with the religious outcasts and sits at table with them. Access to the kingdom of God is offered to all Israelites on the single condition of readiness for conversion. Jesus' refusal to segregate and gather together repentant Israelites into a special Messianic community is shown in both his words and his actions. He avoided all contemporary terms and references to a religious institution.

Even on the supposition that there was a circle of the Twelve before Easter, this is to be regarded as representing not the holy remnant but the whole of Israel, the twelve tribes of the nation. The number twelve un-mistakenly expresses Jesus' claim to the whole of Israel. The refusal to divide the good from the wicked is explicitly emphasized by the parables of the fishing net (Matthew 13:47-50) and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30).

The reserve shown by Jesus in speech and action results from the fear of misunderstandings:

- ❑ To gather the remnant into an organized community would merely have been regarded as entering into competition with the "sects" of the day;
- ❑ Jesus does not simply demand the correct observance of the Mosaic Law. Going beyond and partially canceling the old Law (especially the ritual precepts), he teaches an ethics that is clear and uncomplicated. With a separate community, there would be a danger of a new sectarian legalism;
- ❑ The refusal to set up a special community is also consistent with the new relation between God and man. Jesus wished to manifest God's justice and mercy. All people are sinners before God. If Jesus had formed a separate community, this aspect of his message would have been less prominent;
- ❑ Since Jesus laid down only one condition for entry into the community of salvation, namely, decision for him here and now, the immediate urgency of this demand would have been unnecessarily weakened by the provisional foundation of a special community.

These and other reasons explain Jesus' reserve with regard to an organized community of the heirs of salvation.

## ....THEN TO THE GENTILES

Despite the recognition on principle of Israel's prerogative, Jesus' conception of salvation also has room for the pagans. Jesus excludes the idea of revenge from his teaching (cf. Luke 4:19 with Isaiah 61:2) and, at least in isolated cases, allows pagans to know of the dawn of the reign of God that he has inaugurated (Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30). Furthermore, it appears possible to show that Jesus had in mind the idea of the future pilgrimage of the Gentiles (Matthew 8:11). This would not imply a mission to the pagans but would affirm their future participation in salvation.

--Ingrid Maisch and Anton Vroetle, edited by Patrick J. Hession

## FURTHER REFLECTIONS

### According to Jesus

The preaching of Jesus is the proclamation of the nearness or immanence of the kingdom of God. It is "at hand" (Mark 1:15). In the preaching of the historical Jesus, the kingship of God is never the eternal rule of the creator but the final, future kingship that has intervened in these very days, without cosmic upheaval and transformation or the political reconstruction of Israel. Jesus' message is characterized by a supreme urgency: the moment has come (cf. Luke 12:56). The parables of "crisis" (Luke 13:6-9; Matthew 22:1-14), the judgment-sayings and threats (Luke 10:10-15), the radical moral imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), can only be understood in the light of the coming of the hour of grace.

Jesus promises the kingdom of God to all - tax collectors and prostitutes, the sick and the poor and the little children (Mark 2:15; 10:15ff). It is salvation for people, not judgment. God rejoices in forgiving sinners (Luke 15). Hence, Jesus keeps company with sinners. God's favor presupposes nothing. It only asks for assent and acceptance. This response must bear the mark of the unconditional (Luke 6:27-38). Separation and judgment come only at the end (Matthew 13:24ff). The good news is for Israel (Matthew 10L6) but also for the nations (Matthew 8:11).

Jesus' wonderful works underline his preaching. His healings and exorcisms are signs of the kingdom of God that has come in Jesus (Matthew 11:4; cf. Luke 4:18). Jesus sets himself above the Law and the prophets (Matthew 5:20ff; Luke 16:16). The disciples are congratulated because they hear and see what many prophets and kings longed to see (Matthew 13:16). By virtue of a unique relationship to the Father (Matthew 11:25-27), Jesus claims a mysterious "immediacy to God". He calls men to follow him (Mark 1:16ff; 8:34ff). But, the kingdom is not simply Jesus' and its construction is not his work. It is the kingdom of the Father (Luke 12:32; 22:29f), who alone knows "the hour" (Matthew 24:36)

The kingdom of God "comes", it can only be received, it must be prayed for (Matthew 6:10; Mark 10:15; Luke 11:2). God's kingship is there in Jesus, and hence now, while it is also still to come. The sovereign freedom of God's intervention is manifested, as it were, in the paradoxical language used to describe it. The sayings and the parables cannot be brought into total harmony: some sayings indicate a term (Matthew 10:23; Mark 9:1; 13:30), others reject all attempts to fix a date (Mark 13:32); some parables speak of growth (Mark 4; Matthew 13:24-30, 47f), others of

admission (Luke 13:24; Matthew 7:13). This may very well be due to the nature of the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. It is an event that rounds off history definitively and thus penetrates constantly into every situation so that it can only be expressed in temporal categories that clash with one another.

These sayings escape the grasp of human system and science. It is basic to the message that the world and its situation are understood in the light of God's kingship, while the kingship is not a projection of anything of this world. It is something utterly different and unique. If this is correct, we can understand why Jesus made no descriptive utterances with regard to the kingship of God but spoke in parables (Mark 4:33f), similes, summonses, and maxims that give hints of that transcendent reality. We can understand why the group of disciples that formed around Jesus and the college of the Twelve are not simply identical with the fellowship in the kingdom of God.

### **In Early Christianity**

The New Testament creedal formulas and professions of faith show that the primitive Christian preaching was centered on faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord, the Son of God (Romans 10:9; 1 John 5:1; John 20:31). The formulas have been divided into two classes, one dealing with faith in the person of Jesus, the other with his works - his mission and passion, death, and resurrection, his exaltation and return (1 Corinthians 15:3-5; 1 Peter 1:18-21; 3:18-23). Both types of actions speak of God's final action in history.

Peter's address to the crowds at Pentecost ends with the words: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). The installation as Messiah and Lord, the proof of his being Son of God, come through his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:3). But, the resurrection follows his passion (Philippians 2:9). The Risen Lord who has overcome death is the first-born of many brothers (Romans 8:29).

Jesus' message of the reign of God at hand is absorbed in the Christ-event as thus sketched. The post-Easter faith sees the passion and death of Jesus as a saving event of the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus. Jesus, in whom the kingdom was at hand, is the exalted Lord in his death, clothed with the splendor of the royal lordship of God. The great event of the coming of the kingship of God bears his name.

St. Paul speaks only rarely, and then in a futuristic sense, of the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10; 15:50; Galatians 1:5, 21) as the heritage of the faithful. Ephesians 5:5 speaks of "the kingdom of Christ and of God". In Paul's theology, the kingship of God is realized fundamentally in the Lordship of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:24; cf Colossians 1:13). It is present in the faithful (Colossians 3:1-4), in the Church (Colossians 1:18, 24), in the work of the authorized officials and charismatics (Ephesians 4:11-16).

This is a "fragrance" that is spread among the pagans by the preaching of the Church (2 Corinthians 2:14). The triumphant quality of the life of faith shows how Jesus Christ has reduced to impotence the powers of this world, each region of which had its own "lord" according to Hellenistic beliefs. The exalted Christ exercises his cosmic sovereignty through the

Church (Ephesians 1:21ff; 3:10; 4:8-10), and his lordship comes to its perfect fulfillment at the Second Coming, the conquest of all enemies of God and of death itself, when God will be all in all (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:24-28).

The early letters of St. Paul show a sense of the end of the world being immanent. But, for the most part, he refrains from all efforts to picture or represent the future glory (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:9). Statements bearing on personal fellowship with Christ and the faithful are always kept central (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35ff; 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Except for the one text, John 3:35, the term "kingdom of God" is not found in the writings of John. The message of Christ is characterized by a future time - of life, death, judgment, joy, and peace - which has been made a present reality.

At times, there are glimpses of the future: the resurrection of the body and judgment (John 5:28ff), eternal life (12:25). This aspect is brought out still more clearly in 1 John (1 John 3:2; 4:17). But, in Revelation, the future kingdom of God is identical with the kingdom of Christ (Revelation 11:15), and through Christ the Church has become the kingdom of God (Revelation 1:6; 5:10). History is the battlefield where the hostile powers fight against this kingdom, which triumphs in the end.

Mark uses the doctrine of the messianic secret to link Jesus' message of the reign of God with the post-Easter faith. He draws on apocalyptic notions (Mark 13) and reflects on the relationship between the Church and the kingdom of God (Mark 4:11).

In Matthew, the kingdom has already become a standard concept in understanding the Church (Matthew 13:52). It means the heavenly reality of the fulfillment of the will of God (Matthew 6:9 & 10). Hence, righteousness ("justice") is the condition of entry into this kingdom (Matthew 5:20). The kingdom comes fully into its own in Matthew through the return of the Son of man and the universal judgment (Matthew 25:31).

In Luke, the history of salvation appears as divided into periods. The time of Jesus' activity is the middle of time and thus distinguished from the time of the Church, which ends with the Second Coming.

Through the history of salvation, the presence of the Church loses in a way its future character.

The later writings of the New Testament show at times a tendency to give a Hellenistic coloring to the "kingdom of heaven", i.e. it becomes literally another world of the present day, e.g. 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 12:28; 2 Peter 1:11, just a heavenly reality, so to speak.

--Peter Huenermann, edited by Patrick J. Hession