

## **THE REIGN OF GOD: 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.

### **As understood 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.

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