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THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH



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There are two questions to be asked: What was Jesus all about? What was his mission? Have we preserved his message or has it been so overlaid with secondary concerns that we are out of focus so to speak, occupying ourselves with secondary concerns without even realizing it? The second question that follows from here is: What is our ultimate obligation before God in the face of Jesus' mission? What did he expect from those who would listen to his message? To this the answer is: *Come follow me!*

Jesus had a vision, he was driven by it, he could not contain it: "I came to throw fire on the earth and how I want to see it burning" (Lc 12:49). This vision he enshrined into two basic symbols: The first one concerns his personal God experience, his God image which he expressed in his cultural context with the word *Abba*. The second is the symbol **Kingdom of God or Reign of God** understood as God's plan for the whole of creation. The symbol Kingdom of God appears 162 times in the New Testament and 92 times on the lips of Jesus, while the word Church is found only twice in the Gospels. This phrase Kingdom was almost forgotten in theology for 2000 years (it was substituted for the more generic term Salvation). Vatican I did not use the phrase at all, in Vatican II it appears at least 75 times.

Jesus did not envision the Kingdom that he preached as something that belongs totally and exclusively to the world to come. It is incarnated in history, in human society, in the world. Although it is not purely and simply identical with the world it is "identifiable" in the world. There are two ways of how to conceive and understand God's plan of salvation.

INDIVIDUALIST VIEW OF SALVATION

The first sees salvation primarily as a rescue operation from this sinful and evil world whereby the good ones

are selected and taken into the New Heaven and the New Earth. The Kingdom is here primarily conceived as totally otherworldly and transcendent with no connection to this present world and its social dimensions. What is overlooked is the fact that no individual exists in isolation. It is not possible to speak of salvation without reference to the world of which one is a part. This goes along with a corresponding vision of the Church. The Church is the place into which all must be brought unless salvation eludes them. The Kingdom is identified with the Church and therefore, she is the safest place to make it to salvation. The mission of the Church is seen as centripetal meaning drawing people inward into its fold, since the Kingdom is only present here and the Church is its gateway.

UNIVERSAL VIEW OF SALVATION

The second one envisions God's plan of salvation more holistically as including all of creation. It means a transformation of all reality rather than a selective process. Here God's plan for the world is perceived not in terms of total destruction but in terms of transformation aiming at the salvation of all. The final goal of creation can therefore be envisioned as the great gathering of all human beings that have ever lived, live and will live together with all creatures of any kind celebrating an eternal feast, "the great banquet" envisioned by Isaiah. It asked for a basic human solidarity prior to family, clan, nationality and religion. All human beings are first and foremost my brothers and sisters. This vision of salvation images the Church in a different way. The Church is not a project for the construction of Noah's ark to rescue the 'Christian remnant' from the irredeemable rest. Instead, the Church is like the leaven that is meant to facilitate the transformation of the world. One could say, the Church's mission is not centripetal but rather centrifugal. It is

the welfare of the whole creation which is conceived here as the object of the Christian mission.

BEING A CHRISTIAN AS A CALL TO MISSION

We must distinguish between being called into the Church through baptism and one's personal salvation. To "be called by God" means to be drawn into God's own plan and into the mission of his Son, which extends into the mission of the Church. To be a Christian means to be a co-worker with God for the salvation-transformation of the world into God's final design. Mission is, therefore, the ultimate aim of any call by God. It means that we are on an assignment for God. Baptism is not a passport to heaven or a ticket for entering eternal life; it is above all a call to mission. Most people will find eternal life without being baptized. The privilege of being a Christian consists precisely in having been called to participate in a special way in the mission of Christ, which continues in the Church, and is meant for the salvation of all. The correct alignment of God's plan is: Kingdom meant for the World and Church in the service of the Kingdom.

THE CHURCH IN THE SERVICE OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus entrusted his mission to his disciples: "As the Father has sent me so I am sending you" (Jn 20:21). Since he described his mission as "being sent to proclaim the Kingdom of God to villages and towns" (Mk 1:38; Lc 4:43), the disciples are under the same command. The object of their mission is the same: to proclaim that God's Kingdom has arrived with and in the person of Jesus, the Christ, to celebrate its presence and to proclaim it as already all pervasively present among all the nations and therefore, to reveal its present and celebrate it with them. Vatican II describes the Church as the mystery of Christ. Her mission must be conceived as being in the service of the Kingdom: "bringing about the secret hidden for ages in God" (Col 1:16; see Eph 3:3-9; 1 Cor 2:6-10). Therefore, the Church has to be envisioned in this broad perspective of God's plan of salvation, which includes all human beings and creation as a whole (see 1 Tim 2:4; Rom 8:22 ff).

CHURCH AND KINGDOM ARE NOT IDENTICAL

The Kingdom of God is not the Kingdom of the Christians. The Church has no monopoly on the Kingdom of God. Citizenship in the Kingdom is not so much a privilege, but rather a summons to solidarity with people, particularly with the excluded and discriminated against. The majority of theologians (although not all) today hold that the Catholic Church in Vatican II did distance herself from an identification with the Kingdom in history now. It replaces what was perhaps the most serious pre-Vatican II ecclesiological misunderstanding, namely, that the Church is identical with the Kingdom of God here on earth. This distinction is clearly made in *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) and in the *Document Dialogue and Proclamation* (DP), and the recent document *Dominus Jesus*. These documents confess that the Kingdom of God is a broader reality than the Church. Yet we have to keep in mind: although the Kingdom may not be identified with the Church, that does not mean that the Kingdom is not present in her.

THE THREEFOLD MISSION OF THE CHURCH

First, to proclaim in Word and Sacrament that the Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. She is the 'already' of the 'not yet', meant to be the concrete realization of God's Kingdom now and sent to witness the Kingdom present and to proclaim it to the whole world. As Christians we are called to "sniff out" God's Kingdom, to sense it and to celebrate its presence here and now. The presence of God's Kingdom will be missed if there are no people to notice it and witness to it. Without celebrating its presence in the liturgy, worship, prayer and songs, it is not possible to stay in touch with the reality of the Kingdom. Praise and thanksgiving are the very language that keep us in touch with the Spirit and the Kingdom.

Second, to create Church communities everywhere and to offer its own life as a test-case which demonstrates that the Kingdom is present and operative in the world today by focussing on the Church's own life justice, peace, freedom and respect for human rights. The Church should offer herself as a "contrast" or a countersign to society at large. But ultimately our actions and our behavior are the touchstones for our contact with the Kingdom. Where the sick are healed and the

lost are found, where people who are despised are accepted and the poor discover their own dignity, where people who are rigid and fossilized come alive again, and old, tired lives become young and fruitful once again - there the Kingdom of God begins.

Third, since the Kingdom is broader than the Church, she must enter into dialogue with society as a whole and with other religious traditions because the Kingdom is already present there. Our life as Christians must be ruled by a basic human solidarity which goes beyond our personal wants and interests as well as all national ones. Understanding God's Kingdom means that the line between "sacred" and "secular" does not exist in

concrete reality. God's Kingdom means that all things are in the sphere of God's sovereignty and, therefore, are God's concern. Two spheres of life are Kingdom foci. Kingdom awareness means that ministry is much broader than Church work. Christians who understand the meaning of God's reign know they are in the Kingdom business, not just Church business. They see all activity as ultimately having Kingdom significance. Their concern is the whole world. And being followers of Christ they know that following him means to "Put oneself second (all our personal ambitions and desires), take up one's cross (all that poses obstacles to our commitment to the Kingdom) and follow the vision of the Lord (Mt 8:34).

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