

Mission as Action in Hope: A theological reflection on our commitment to the promotion of justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC) in our world today

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“Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Introduction:

The promotion of social and ecological justice, reconciliation and peace forms an integral dimension of the mission of the Church- a mission grounded in and giving concrete expression to the hope we proclaim every time we say in the Our Father: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This hope is a distinctive and unique hope forged in the crucible of the Judeo-Christian experience of God’s active engagement in human history, a hope shaped by and patterned upon the Paschal Mystery, the passage of Jesus from life, through death, to new life. Christian mission flows from and gives concrete expression to this hope. It is, in the words of David Bosch, “action in hope.”¹ It is the means by which the future for which we hope is brought into a transforming relationship with the present in which we live. It is “God’s bridge to a world which has not yet come home to the place prepared for it.”²

Our commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation (jpic) is not a humanist political agenda. It is not an expression of some foolish utopian dream of a better world made by human hands. It is, rather, an essential and integral dimension of Christian mission, giving concrete witness to this ultimate hope of the kingdom of God. This is the central argument of this essay which is divided into two parts. The first part will focus on the genesis and nature of Christian hope; the second part will show how this hope shapes our understanding of mission, underpinning our commitment to peace and reconciliation, to social and ecological justice.

First Part

The Genesis and Nature of Christian Hope

Christian Hope Eclipsed

Christianity entered the world of history as an eschatological faith,³ a faith that offered a sure and universal hope, and hence a faith and a hope to be proclaimed to all humanity. A dominant and defining characteristic of the life and mission of the early Church was this eschatological thrust. The first Christians situated and interpreted their experience of Christ within the framework of Israel’s historical eschatology. In the coming of Jesus and in raising him from the dead, God’s eschatological act had already been inaugurated, but it had not yet been completed.

Jesus' resurrection and ascension into glory signified the beginning, the first fruits, of a fulfillment still to come- a fulfillment of which the gift of the Spirit was the pledge. Only another future intervention by God would wipe out all the contradictions on the present. Moreover, the early Christian Church believed that this final intervention (*the Parousia*) was imminent.

With the delay in the advent of the *Parousia*, and under the impact of Greek philosophy, this eschatological perspective of early Christianity was pushed aside, played down, or radically re-interpreted. The Christian message was transformed from the proclamation of God's imminent historical reign to the proclamation of the only true and universal religion of humankind. Faith in God's promises yet to be fulfilled was replaced by faith in an already consummated eternal kingdom. Christ's resurrection came to be viewed as a completed event. The early Church's expectation of "a new heaven and a new earth" was forgotten or ignored.

The eclipse of historical eschatology manifested itself in other ways as well. The early Church's distinction between the present age and the age to come was revised into a distinction between time and eternity. Christians now focused their expectations on a heaven beyond this world, rather than on God's involvement in history: instead of looking forward to the future they looked up to eternity. Attention shifted from the historical Jesus to the pre-existent Logos, and the message of Christ became spiritualized. It became a message about saving one's soul from the world rather than transforming oneself and the world by love.

Furthermore, in regard to the practice of the faith, the accent shifted from giving witness to the future God was going to bring about to doing good deeds in order to earn heaven. We might summarize these developments in the following words of David Bosch, "The expectation of a 'new heaven and a new earth' was spiritualized away. Emphasis was laid instead on the spiritual journey of the individual believer and on a *post-mortem* afterlife rather than on a future resurrection from the dead. The Church was increasingly identified with the kingdom of God; it became the dispenser of the sacraments and the place where, through the sacraments, souls were won for Christ."⁴ With this development the understanding of mission was altered. Mission became the extension of the Church as it existed rather than the proclamation of a new creation patterned on the resurrection of Christ and of which the Church is called to be the sacramental sign. Unfortunately, traces of this distortion of Christian hope and of the understanding of mission have been characteristic of Christian theology until recently, and perhaps lie behind the continuing hesitancy we note in our commitment to the jpic agenda.

Christian Hope Recovered

One of the striking characteristics of twentieth century theology has been the recovery of the eschatological, hopeful perspective of early Christianity, first in Protestant, and later in Catholic theology. No theologian has done more to rehabilitate Christian hope than the great German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann. In his best known work, *Theology of Hope*, published in 1964, he wrote, "From first to last, and not merely as an epilogue, Christianity is hope, forward looking and forward-moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present."⁵ Moltmann took issue with a tradition that had so spiritualized the Christian hope as to render it of little or no earthly use and underlined the socio-political relevance of this hope. Carl Braaten, too, has underlined the critical importance of eschatology, stating that "it cannot be isolated from other

themes of faith and dealt with in a treatise on the last things. Instead, it determines the horizon of all Christian understanding and is thematically structural for all the contents of faith and action.”⁶

One of the great changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council was the recovery of this hopeful, eschatological horizon within which the Christian message took on a new, powerful and integrated meaning. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, broadened our understanding of the Church’s mission, highlighting its economic, social and political dimensions. This vision was further developed by Catholic theologians like Johannes Metz, Edward Schillebeeckx, and the Liberation Theologians. Unfortunately it has lost ground in more recent times and needs to be reaffirmed, for it is a vision with a long and sure pedigree as I will try to show in the following pages, grounded in the biblical concept of God and his relation to the world.

The Experience of Israel

From its foundation, Israel’s experience was one of hope, a hope grounded in the belief that YHWH, the God of Israel, had entered its history and was leading it towards a definite future. The Israelites’ experience of God was thus, in Moltmann’s striking phrase “harnessed between memory and hope.”⁷ The Israelites recounted and interpreted past revelations of God as anticipations of a reality yet to be, as promises of a future to be disclosed. In Moltmann’s pithy phrase, they spoke of God historically and of history eschatologically.⁸ The God of the Israelites is characteristically the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the God of Moses and the prophets, above all, the God of the Exodus. The Exodus was understood, not as a mythical event, but as an historical event which pointed beyond itself to a greater future.

The naming of God in relation to that event is particularly significant. YHWH appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush and commissions him to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses asks God to identify himself by name, so he can tell the people who it is that is sending him. God replies:

‘I AM WHO I AM’...*Say this to the people of Israel: “I AM has sent me to you.”...This is my name forever and thus I am to be remembered throughout the generations’ (Ex. 3:14-15).*

In this text, the word translated ‘I AM’ consists of four Hebrew letters YHWH which represents some form of the Hebrew verb ‘to be’. The exact form is not known. For most biblical scholars, the meaning of YHWH is best expressed in the statement “I am the one who will be there with you...in the way I will be there,” thus linking God name and identity with future events yet to unfold. Thus, Old Testament discourse on God gives prominence to the future “as the mode of God’s existence with us.”⁹ Like his kingdom, God is coming, and it is “only as the coming one, as future, is he already present. He is present in the way in which his future in promise and hope empowers the present.”¹⁰ Moreover, it is precisely in this way of being present that God is experienced by the Israelites as a liberating God, a God of hope.

Keeping Hope Alive: the Rose of the Prophets

Throughout its history, Israel received many promises from God. Some were fulfilled, others left behind, and still others were reinterpreted and expanded through partial fulfillment. For example, the Exodus event, as remembered, recounted and celebrated, became a pledge of an

even greater hope. This process of refinement and reinterpretation can be seen especially in the prophets, who draw attention especially to the ethical implications of Israel's hope. Tapping into the rich reservoir of hope, expectation and longing associated with the covenant, they pointed out that these hopes could never be realized as long as Israel failed to conform to God's will as expressed in the covenant. They also deplored the narrowing of Israel's hopes and expectations to the sectional interests of the ruling classes, while the poor, the orphan, and the widow went needy.

And yet, however harsh the criticisms and condemnations of the prophets are, condemnation is not their last word. The bottom line of all the great prophets is that, even though the Israelites may have abandoned God, He will never abandon them. He will intervene once more to establish his rule of peace, justice and love. He will make a new covenant, written this time not on tablets of stone, but deep within their hearts. This hope for the definitive establishment of God's rule of peace and love is associated with the coming of the Messiah.

Israel's messianic hope is movingly expressed in Isaiah. For Isaiah, the Messiah will be a wise, holy and peaceful King "who will judge the poor with justice and decide in favour of the land's afflicted" (Is. 11:1-10). He will put an end to conflict and bring lasting peace. With his coming, warring factions will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks (Is. 2:4) and the lamb and the lion shall lie down together. The word that Isaiah uses for peace is "shalom," and it has a much richer meaning than we normally give to the term "peace". It signifies not merely the absence of war or violence, but the full presence of harmony and integrity, both for the individual person and for society. It embraces all the dimensions of life, personal and social, national and international. It means more than political security. It comprises justice, peace, the integrity of creation and their interdependence- all gifts of God. For Isaiah there is no peace worthy of the name without justice (Is. 9:7), and the peace which the Messiah shall establish among people will be accompanied by the rejoicing and flowering of the desert and the dry land (Is. 35:1-2). Eventually this messianic hope came to be identified with Jesus and his Kingdom Mission.

In his best-selling book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict argues that Isaiah's vision of a healed and peaceful world, in which warring groups "will beat their swords into plowshares" (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3), is an outdated aspect of the Jewish Messianic ideal, falsified by the facts of history. Jesus, says Benedict, did not bring "world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world." Instead what he brought to the nations of the earth was "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the true God."¹¹ However, the vision of the Isaiah and the mission of Jesus should not be opposed. In Jesus we see, as N. T. Wright puts it, "the biblical portrait of YHWH come to life: the loving God, rolling up his sleeves (Is 52:10) to do in person the job that no one else could do, the creator God giving new life; the God who works *through* his created world, and supremely through his human creatures; the faithful God dwelling in the midst of his people; the stern and tender God relentlessly opposed to all that destroys or distorts the good creation, and especially human beings, but recklessly loving all those in need and distress."¹² This is abundantly clear when we focus on the mission of Jesus.

The Kingdom Mission of Jesus

Jesus conducted his mission against the background of Jewish restoration eschatology. He took its key symbol of the kingdom of God, and made it central to his message and ministry. The Synoptic Gospels introduce Jesus' public ministry with the concise phrase: "The time is

fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent. Believe the Good News” (Mk 1:14-15; Mt, 4:17; Lk 4:43). The kingdom was so obviously central to Jesus’ life and ministry that Karl Rahner could observe: “Jesus preached the Kingdom not himself.” In his teaching Jesus appears as the representative (cf. Lk 17:20-21), the revealer (cf. Mk 4:11-12; Mt 11:25-26), the champion (cf. Mk 3:27), the initiator (cf. Mt 11:12), the instrument (cf. Mt 12:28), the mediator (cf. Mk 2:18-19), and the bearer (cf Mt 11:5) of the kingdom of God.

Yet, Jesus never defined exactly what he meant by the kingdom of God, a concept we find nowhere in the Old Testament.¹³ Indeed, it is clear that he counted on his audience to be familiar with the symbol at least in its conventional meanings. As John Bright observed: For all his repeated mention of the Kingdom of God, Jesus never once paused to define it. Nor did any hearer ever interrupt him to ask “Master what do these words ‘Kingdom of God,’ which you use so often, mean?” On the contrary Jesus used the term as if assured it would be understood, and indeed it was. The Kingdom of God lay within the vocabulary of every Jew. It was something they understood and longed for desperately.¹⁴

At the time of Jesus the kingdom of God, had become a kind of overarching metaphor for a variety of hopes and expectations, ranging from the liberation of Israel from Roman rule (nationalist-political expectation) to the destruction of the present age and the emergence of a new heaven a new earth (apocalyptic-expectation). By his life and death, his preaching and symbolic actions (activities such as table-fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, healings and exorcisms, forgiveness of sinners), he gave a new shape to this familiar symbol. As Sean Freyne points out, Jesus’ life and ministry not only affirmed Israel’s hope but reinterpreted it. In the first place, Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God as a hope for the present, and not just for the distant future, and secondly he purifies it of “aspects such as domination, majesty, power, conquest, destruction of enemies” and puts in their place values such as peace, justice, meekness, single-mindedness.¹⁵

Jesus speaks of the Kingdom, not as a distant dream, but as a hope that is being realized as he speaks and acts. In the words of John Fuellenbach: “Jesus declares that what Isaiah had promised as God’s final messianic future is now at work. Reconciliation and deliverance are not distant songs of a utopian future far removed from present reality. The promise is invading the world now in every relationship and circumstance of our lives.”¹⁶ Jesus’ way of establishing the kingdom of God was in stark contrast to the often violent pursuit of specific political objectives by contemporary Jewish groups – groups who laid claim to the hopes of Israel as the legitimation of their activities. His life-style have clear witness to a new way, a different way. He abandoned the security of house, family, and possessions for the insecure life of an itinerant preacher. The life-style he chose was thus a protest against the prevailing value-systems in the Palestine of his day: the naked greed and opulence of Herod and his court; and the view of the temple-based aristocracy that material possessions were signs of divine blessings. Greed and acquisitiveness were totally inappropriate in light of a God who cared for the smallest and most insignificant of his creatures.

Jesus’ Revolution

As manifested in Jesus’ words and deeds, the kingdom of God meant good news for the poor, healing for the sick, and liberation for the enslaved and oppressed. He inaugurated his mission by citing one of the Jubilee texts from the Prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord (Lk 4:18-19).

Jesus' evangelical practice represented an absolute reversal of the scale of values of Palestinian theocratic society. The afflictions of the poor, then as now, were in large measure caused by repression, discrimination and exploitation by the rich and powerful, the upholders of the *status quo*. In his ministry Jesus turned deliberately to those who have been pushed aside: to the sick who were segregated on cultic grounds; to tax-collectors who were excluded on political and religious grounds; and to prostitutes and public sinners who were excluded on moral grounds.¹⁷ In his compassionate outreach to outcasts, Jesus concretely embodied God's kingly rule as good news for them; God's rule signaled the end of their misery and the introduction of a new order of social relationships based on the principle of inclusion. No one is excluded from the love of God "who causes his sun to rise on bad as well as good, and sends down his rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike" (Mt. 5:45) What amazes one again and again is the inclusiveness of Jesus' Kingdom mission. It embraces both poor and rich, the oppressed and oppressor, both the sinners and the devout.¹⁸ His mission is one of dissolving alienation and breaking down walls of hostility, of crossing boundaries. It is a summons to think beyond the narrow limits of greed and fear, to cross national cultural and social boundaries and build authentic human community in the light of God's ultimate rule of the universe.

While Jesus' Kingdom message and ministry repudiated the way of violence, it nevertheless envisaged a radical change in the existing social and political order, Jesus' words and actions represented a consistent challenge to the attitudes, practices and structures that tended arbitrarily to restrict or exclude potential members of the Israelite community."¹⁹ Some theologians have argued that Jesus had no social or political agenda, that he did not wish to make the world a better place. The well known biblical scholar, N.T. Wright, reaches a different conclusion. Jesus, he points out, clearly had a political agenda. In the Judaism of his day religion and politics were inseparable. As his contemporaries would have expected, he wanted to bring God's kingly rule to bear on the present world. In the "Our Father" he taught his disciples to pray: "Thy kingdom come. They will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

According to Wright, Jesus' words, works and prayers all had immense social and political implications. He was not proclaiming a private or personal reign of God's spirit in the souls of individuals. He was launching a revolutionary movement which would turn Israel and the world upside-down. He wanted to establish God's reign of justice, peace, truth and love in Israel and (through Israel) among all nations on earth. What he rejected were the ways in which his contemporaries envisaged God's rule being established. He rejected the politics of violent revolution, of easy compromise, and of narrow nationalism and chose instead the path of redemptive suffering. His way would be to turn the other cheek, to walk the second mile and to take up the cross. He would defeat evil by letting evil do its worst to him, by suffering evil in love and forgiving his enemies.²⁰ Here we come to the profound paradox at the heart of Christian hope and Christian mission. It has little or nothing to do with human optimism or any form of utopian thinking. It is ultimately a paschal hope, a hope against hope, a hope fashioned in the midst of violence and death.

From Kingdom Hope to Paschal Hope

Jesus' kingdom message did not meet with universal acceptance. It met with fear, suspicion, hostility and rejection on the part of the Jewish political and religious leaders of his time. Finally, it led him to Calvary where he prayed for forgiveness for those whose fear had led them to destroy him. If the Cross can be said to represent Jesus' supreme witness to God's kingly rule, it is his resurrection from the dead which is the foundation and guarantee of its victory over the power of evil, and the ultimate symbol of Christian hope. The disciples of Jesus met him again on Easter Sunday morning and caught a glimpse of a new world where the promise of the kingdom would be realized. The world as they knew it was passing away and a new creation was about to be born. All the relevance and urgency of the early Church's mission was derived from this paschal hope. Which was now not simply the hope of Jesus but hope in Jesus and in his victory over sin and death. The proclaimer of the kingdom has become the one proclaimed; the messenger had become the message.

The Christian hope, then, is hope for the kingdom of God, but this hope must not be identified with secular hopes for a better world. It is a hope fashioned from the crucible of the paschal mystery, the mystery of Jesus' passage from death to new life. It is vitally important never to separate the resurrection of Jesus from his death on the cross. To ignore or play down the passion and death of Jesus is inevitably to end up with a superficial understanding of the central event of our salvation and to misrepresent the nature of Christian hope. The true meaning of the resurrection is not grasped until we come to terms with the revelation of God's face in the death of Jesus on the Cross.

Jesus lived and died to show us the Father and inaugurate the Father's loving rule on earth. It is relatively easy to see the face of a compassionate and loving Father in the public ministry of Jesus, in his words and deeds. It is altogether more difficult to see the Father's face in the horrific death of Jesus. But the Father was involved in the death of Jesus. In his suffering and death Jesus was supremely the revealer of the Father. It was the Father in him who was drawing him to this end, and it was the Father's loving face that was ultimately revealed in this dramatic display of logic of love in a sinful world. On the cross, Jesus represents the utter vulnerability of a God whose only power is love entering a world whose strength is hate. Thus on Calvary, as Noel Dermot O Donoghue has so well said "we are at the place of the tears of God, not of his triumph and vindicating anger. The loving Father cannot escape from his unloving and destructive children; he is imprisoned by his love as surely as they are imprisoned by their hate."²¹

In the cross of Christ, we are confronted by a God made weak and helpless (at least in the common sense understanding of these terms) by the very intensity and relentlessness of his/her love for us. In the words of Dorothee Sölle: "God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us."²²

But how does a suffering God, a weak God, heal and redeem us? The answer to this question is perhaps more likely to be gleaned from the intuitive perceptions of a loving heart than by the rational deductions of a logical mind. Nevertheless, a mind that is in tune with a loving heart may come to some appreciation of the strange logic of the cross. Here I offer a few thoughts which may serve to illumine this logic. The vulnerable God revealed in the cross of Christ throws into

bold relief the basic sin of human beings, which is essentially a loss of heart. As Moltmann puts it, "survival of the fittest is our eschatology."²³ The world in which we live is a competitive world, which, in the main, rewards toughness and the will to succeed. To succeed in the world we have to subjugate the more sensitive and compassionate side of our nature to the inflexible canons of progress, profit and success, we become hardened against our fellow-creatures. Our heroes and heroines are the go-getters, and the grabbers with the beautiful smiles and the armoured hearts, who overcome all obstacles in their relentless quest for success. We have created a society that rewards ruthlessness and the ability to prevail at all costs. Such a society regards the meek, the weak and all who fall behind in one way or another as failures.

In our sinful consorting with the God of success, we quickly become apathetic (unfeeling) men and women of action, capable, because of our lack of heart, of bringing a great deal of unnecessary suffering into the lives of others. Somehow, we need to be brought to realize the suffering we cause to others (and indeed the damage we do to ourselves), and made to feel compunction. It is, as Moltmann points out, when we are confronted and challenged by the revelation of the cross – the culminating point of God's love affair with us – that we are brought to see, at one and the same time, the frightening heartlessness of our relentless pursuit of success and the awesome pathos of God's vulnerable love for his/her fallen children. It would seem that the toughness and apathy of a sinful humanity find their only antidote in a love which does not hide its vulnerability, but rather bears its fragile flame to the bitter end.

While the cross reveals the strange logic of divine love at work in a sinful world, it is the resurrection that reveals the victory of that love. The power to transform us into compassionate men and women, capable of becoming partakers in the drama of divine pathos, comes from the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection shows the suffering of our compassionate God to be, in truth, divine power made perfect inhuman weakness. The resurrection is the basis of Christian hope because it reveals the victory of a love which decisively turns its back on success, and pursues to the last its utterly vulnerable course of identification with those whom society casts aside as failures.

Summary

I have traced the genesis of Christian hope from its beginning in the hope of Israel through various stages of development and transformation to its climax in the paschal mystery of Christ. It is a hope grounded in the experience of a loving and compassionate God who chooses to become engaged in the drama of human history and who is pre-eminently a God of the future, God who comes to rule the earth. It is a hope, not for a distant and unreachable future, but for a future that is breaking into the present and that involves a radical transformation of the world as we know it. It is a hope for "a new heaven and a new earth," that summons us to active engagement on behalf of the poor and oppressed for the creation of a more just and loving society on earth. It is a hope which is shaped not only by the life and ministry of Jesus, but especially by the paschal mystery, and by that peculiar logic of the divine confrontation with sin and evil disclosed in that mystery. It is therefore not only a hope that is compatible with suffering but which is found in its supreme form in the heart of suffering. Finally, it is a total hope because it is based ultimately on the resurrection of Christ, on his decisive victory over sin and evil and is therefore sure and unconquerable.

Second Part

Mission in the Light of Christian Hope

In the first part of this paper, I dealt almost exclusively with the genesis and nature of Christian hope. In this part, my focus will be principally on the theme of mission, but mission interpreted from the perspective of Christian hope. Up to relatively recent times, mission, in the Catholic Church at least, tended to be ecclesiocentric. Mission meant the extension of the Church as it was known to the ends of the earth rather than the transformation of the Church and the world in the light of the Christian hope of a new earth and a new heaven. However, this was not always the case. The early Christian mission, especially that of St. Paul was, as we shall see, inspired and directed by Christian hope.

Erecting signs of God's New World

In Paul's vision, mission and the hope of God's kingdom are intimately linked. Mission paves the way and prepares humanity for the final stage of God's reign, when not only humanity but all creation will be liberated and transformed on the model of Christ's resurrection. For Paul, mission means announcing the Lordship of Christ over all reality and inviting people to respond to it. It means the proclamation of a new state of affairs that God has initiated in Christ, a state of affairs that concerns the nations and all of creation and that climaxes in the celebration of God's final glory. But proclamation is not enough. God's final victorious reign offers no justification for ethical passivity. Mission invites and sustains an active participation in God's plan for the liberation of humanity in the here and now. In Paul's theology of mission, as Bosch points out, Christians are challenged to combat "the oppressive powers of the structures of sin and death, which in our world cry out for God's world of justice and peace...by being agitators for God's incoming reign; they must erect, in the here and now and in the teeth of those structures, signs of God's new world."²⁴

Viewing mission in the light of God's reign demands that the scope of the church's mission become more comprehensive than has traditionally been the case. Service of God's reign provides missionaries with a theological framework which makes commitment to justice, peace, reconciliation and the integrity of creation essential and integral dimensions of the Church's mission, rather than preliminary or secondary elements. In the words of Carl Braaten, mission viewed from the perspective of God's reign will "mean something more than saving souls and planting churches; it will mean something more than emergency relief and charitable works. Mission will assume the role of advocacy, tracking down causes of global injustice and violence... If faith is radical dependence on God, mission is total interdependence among people, overcoming all idolatry in the one case, and all systems of domination, oppression, and exploitation of the many by the few on the other."²⁵ Mission in the horizon of the Kingdom combines, in the words of Braaten, "both the passion of the evangelicals for the uniqueness of the Christian message and the vision of the ecumenists for the universality of its scope."²⁶ It brings together evangelization and humanization, Gospel and social concern, faith and political action, religious worship and secular work.²⁷

Continuing the Mission of Christ

Our mission today is, as N. T. Wright puts it, to build on the foundation established by Jesus, not simply to repeat what he did. What God did in Jesus, the Messiah, was unique, climactic and decisive, and hence unrepeatable. Wright uses a striking image to capture the

relationship between us and Jesus. “We are”, he says, “like musicians called to play and sing the unique and once-only-written musical score. We don’t have to write it again, but we have to play it.”²⁸ We are called, not so much to imitate Christ but to live by his Spirit and reflect his light to the world, so that God’s will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

All mission in Christ’s name is dedicated towards the integral transformation of this world in which we live. As we have already seen, there was nothing escapist or private about the message and ministry of Jesus. He lived and died and rose again in order to establish God’s kingdom on earth, and our task is to continue that work. The words of Jesus to Pilate in John 18:36, often mistranslated as: “My kingdom is not of this world” have sometimes been used to support the view that God’s kingdom is not concerned with this present world. However Jesus did not say these words. What he said was “My kingdom is not from this world”. This means that his kingdom did not state with this world. It started from God, but it is meant for this world. As disciples of Jesus, our task is to announce in word and deed that God’s Kingdom has indeed come and, in the power of the Spirit, to act boldly to shape our world in accordance with that Kingdom. However, the way we act in the world, and for the sake of the world, must be the way of Jesus – the way of the cross.

Obeying the Logic of the Cross

Centered on the following of Christ and the embodiment of Christian values, our mission constitutes a deliberately chosen and lived witness of contradiction to the unjust *status quo*, and of opposition to those who seek to uphold it because they benefit from it. It is also equally opposed to those tough minded utopians prepared to resort to any means to topple the ‘powers that be’ and usher in the Kingdom.

As a continuation of Christ’s mission, our mission is fuelled by a love which incarnates itself in action for justice, and by a concern for justice which will settle for nothing less than a civilization of love. Thus, it will avoid, on the one hand, an inept moralism which would reduce Christian love to mere sentimentality, and, on the other hand, a fanatical concern for the righting of wrongs that can so easily degenerate into a loveless pragmatism, blind to any standard other than sheer political success.

Our mission, directed towards the kingdom of God and shaped by the paschal mystery, will be concerned with the conversion of individuals to the mind and heart of Christ, but it will not confine itself to this activity. It will also confront, challenge and seek to change those institutionalised forms of greed and selfishness, which we often refer to today as ‘sinful structures.’ However, as paschal missionaries, we are not naïve about the inevitable ambiguity of all ethico-political commitments. We realize that the voices of liberating grace and sinful self-assertion are co-mingled in all such commitments, and that a profound spiritual discernment is required if we are to distinguish between God’s liberating plans for us and our own selfish interests. The soil of such discernment is prayer. Prayer need not be a retreat from the real world and its problems. If it is genuine listening to God, it will lead to a deep and enduring commitment to the world – a commitment that truly transforms the world because it obeys the logic of the cross rather than the logic of Marx or Adam Smith.

In the Light of our Ultimate Future in God

The kingdom of God is ultimately not something we can finally establish on earth. As Karl Rahner has said, the kingdom of God for which Christians hope is the absolute future which is God himself. "God himself ... wills to be the infinite future of humanity, infinitely transcending all that human beings could ever plan or fashion for themselves."²⁹ This orientation to God as our absolute future challenges us to adopt a critical stance towards the historically given state of any society. "Such a critical stance", says Rahner, "can be radical, patient and courageous; it implies neither a conservative glorification of the present situation, underpinned by ideology, nor a destructive impatience which seeks violent means to force a new world into existence by sacrificing the men of today."³⁰

Thus, the affirmation of God as our absolute future, far from undermining the value of our socio-political commitments within history and our efforts to transform the world, provides a perspective which can guarantee their enduring significance and true value. This it does in three ways: first, by offering a framework of meaning profound enough to do justice to the world; second, by functioning as a critical perspective which de-absolutises all human achievements of justice; third, by providing a positive incentive to human beings in their efforts to transform human life in history. Since God is our absolute future and the ultimate horizon of human freedom, no historical achievement, however great, is unsurpassable or beyond criticism. At the same time, precisely because we have an absolute future in God, all our efforts to transform human life within history have enduring value. This view of the relationship between the absolute future (God) for which Christians hope and human efforts to transform the world seems to me to find an echo in the following statements from Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:

Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectation of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come. That is why, although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society.

When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise – human dignity, sisterly and brotherly communion, and freedom – according to the command of the Lord and in his Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom 'of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace'. Here on earth the kingdom is mysteriously present; when the Lord comes it will enter its perfection (no. 39).

Furthermore, God is bringing about this transformed world now, far beyond the frontiers of the Church. Our task is to get in tune with what God is doing. We have to find out where the kingdom is already present in an initial and germinal way. We have to discern and nourish such seeds of the Kingdom by putting our resources and energies there. In discerning and nourishing these seeds of the Kingdom, contemplative prayer and presence will have to balance active social and political involvement.

Through the Power of Suffering Love

John Fuellenbach reminds us that the words 'success' and 'optimism' are not part of our tool kit as witnesses, signs, and instruments of God's kingdom: "Our faith tells us that it is hope against hope that keeps us going and gives us the necessary courage and even the audacity to believe that the kingdom will win."³¹ Jürgen Moltmann expresses this profound conviction of our faith in these words: "Where people suffer because they love, God suffers in them and they suffer in God... Where God suffers the death of Jesus and thereby demonstrates the power of his love, these people also find the power to remain in love despite pain and death, becoming neither bitter nor superficial."³² The way of suffering love, then, is profoundly hopefilled. For its hope is grounded in the experience of God's power made perfect in the utter vulnerability of compassionate loving, releasing men and women from apathy and despair to live new purposeful lives – lives that are compassionate, joyful and free.

Conclusion

In spite of all that has been and is being done by the Church, and especially religious and missionary congregations and institutes, to promote social and ecological justice in our world today, the tide of human suffering continues to rise, inducing in us a sense of helplessness. Regional conflicts reap a cruel harvest of death and destruction in many countries. Hundreds of thousands are killed in acts of wanton violence. Millions are rendered homeless or displaced. The gap between the rich and poor continues to widen. Basic human rights are suppressed at the whim of dictators. Global arming and the exploitation of nature are endangering human existence on this earth and depriving future generations of their rightful inheritance. Dark and demonic forces seem bent on spoiling the achievements of many years of local effort and missionary endeavour.

Furthermore, a particularly dangerous form of Christianity is sweeping through the developing world today. It preaches that God has decreed the sufferings of the poor, that this world is not our concern, that Christian morality should be restricted to personal and private matters, and that politics is not the business of the Church. In practice this form of Christianity supports the present unjust status quo and is being financed and promoted by foreign interests and local elites who benefit from the present system.

In such a context we might wonder if anything we can do will make a difference. Our deepest Christian resources of faith, hope and love provide the answer. The God of Jesus Christ is an ever faithful God, who is to be found even at the heart of human destruction and failure. Human beings are never abandoned by God. In Christ, God has taken unto himself the sufferings of the world and embrace both victims and victimisers. The God who is always with us, continuing to transform death into life and chaos into new creation, calls us to become his co-workers in the re-creation of the world.

As members of religious and missionary institutes who strive to witness to the good Gospel of Christ who liberates and unifies, we must extend and deepen our commitment to social and ecological justice. We must be artisans of hope for the suffering and marginalised in the world: a practical and effective hope that combines faith and justice, that challenges that unjust *status quo* and identifies with the poor and oppressed in society; a hope that finds expression in concerted programmes of action for the creation of an alternative future and struggles for the structural changes required if such an alternative future is to emerge.

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- ¹ *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, NY, 1991, p. 498.
- ² Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Centre*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 43
- ³ Cf. Carl Braaten, *The Flaming Center*, p. 39
- ⁴ *Transforming Mission*, p. 141
- ⁵ *Theology of Hope*, SCM Press, London, 1967, p. 16.
- ⁶ *The Flaming Center*, p. 39.
- ⁷ Jürgen Moltman, *The Experiment Hope*, SCM Press, London, 1975, p. 47.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p. 46.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* p. 50.
- ¹⁰ *The Experiment Hope*, p. 50
- ¹¹ *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, p. 44
- ¹² *The Challenge of Jesus*, SPCK, London, 2000, p. 90.
- ¹³ J.P. Meier points out that “the kingdom of God” is not a concept, but a symbol. It “does not have a definition but tells a story... a story that stretches from the first page of the bible to the last.” Cf. *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 2, Doubleday, New York, 1994, p. 241.
- ¹⁴ *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1953, 17-18.
- ¹⁵ Sean Freyne, “Jesus Christ: Witness and Embodiment of the Hopes of Israel” in *Christian Resources of Hope*, ed., Maureen Junker-Kenny, Columbia Press, Dublin, 1995, p. 15.
- ¹⁶ *The Kingdom of God: The Central Message of Jesus*, Orbis, New York, 1995, pp. 81-82.
- ¹⁷ Cf. A. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, Orbis, New York, 1989, pp. 21-25.
- ¹⁸ D. Senior & C. Sthmueller, *The Biblical Foundations of Mission*, Orbis, New York, p. 148-149.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.147.
- ²⁰ Cf. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, SPCK, London, 1996, pp. 564-565; cf. also, *the Challenge of Jesus*, SPCK, London, 2000, p. 71.
- ²¹ *Heaven in Ordinarie*, T & T Clarck, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 146.
- ²² *Christ the Representative*, SCM Press, London, 1970, p. 150.
- ²³ *The Experiment Hope*, p. 71.
- ²⁴ *Transforming Mission*, p. 176.
- ²⁵ *The Flaming Centre*, p. 89
- ²⁶ *The Flaming Centre*, p. 87
- ²⁷ *The Flaming Centre*, p. 91
- ²⁸ *The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 140
- ²⁹ *Theological Investigations*, Darton. Longman & Todd, London, vol. 12, 1975, p. 239.
- ³⁰ *Theological Investigations*, Darton. Longman & Todd, London, vol. 16, 1979, p. 242.
- ³¹ “Be Compassionate!” in *Religious Life Review*, November/December 2008, p. 360. 368.
- ³² *The Experiment Hope*, p. 80.