

The Gospel of the Kingdom

Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios

Outstanding scholar, theologian, philosopher, polyglot and man of letters. Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios sought to bring together in a holistic vision, several disciplines like philosophy, economics, political science, medicine, education, physics and theology.

Born in 1922 at Tripunithura, Kerala, the great scholar-bishop had his earlier stints in his homestate as a journalist and postal service employee. He proceeded to Ethiopia in 1947 accepting the job of a teacher there and in course of time became the Special Secretary to Emperor Haillie Sellasi. He had an exceptional educational career in Yale, Princeton and Oxford Universities. Returning to Kerala, he was ordained as a priest of the Orthodox Church. In 1967 Fr. Paul Verghese became the Principal of the Orthodox Theological Seminary. In 1975, he was elevated as a bishop. Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios took charge of the Delhi Diocese of the Orthodox Church in July 1975.

Honours came unsought to Mar Gregorios. He had the good fortune to be the President of the World Council of Churches and the Indian Philosophical Congress. In 1988, he received the Soviet Land Nehru Award. His Grace travelled widely and showed an unusual intellectual courage to explore new paradigms in human thinking. He was visiting professor in several universities like the J. N. U. in New Delhi. The philosopher-bishop passed away on 24th November 1996 and his mortal remains lie entombed in the Orthodox Seminary Chapel, Kottayam.

Mar Gregorios has authored more than 50 books. *The Joy of Freedom, Freedom of Man, The Cosmic Man, The Human Presence, Enlightenment East and West, A Light Too Bright* and the spiritual autobiography *Love's Freedom: The Grand Mystery* are some of the most remarkable among these. Hundreds of his articles and lectures have been published in leading newspapers, and international magazines.

The Gospel of the Kingdom

(Bible Studies)

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Contents

- 1 Blessed are the Poor
- 2 Looking for the Coming of the Kingdom
- 3 The Nature of the Kingdom
- 4 More Parables of the Kingdom
- 5 The Presence of Christ in the World
- 6 Our Presence in the World
- 7 Christian Presence and the Royal Priesthood
- 8 Recapitulation

1

Blessed are the Poor

Luke 6:20-26

The Beatitudes in St. Luke's version of Jesus' sermon differ slightly from St. Matthew's account (Matt. 5:3-11).

But they serve the same purpose. Jesus the Messiah announced the content of his messianic mission through the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes are the summary of that sermon.

The Kingdom of God is offered to the poor, to the hungry, to the unhappy, and to the oppressed classes of society (Lk. 6:20-22). The coming of the Kingdom brings judgment on the rich and the well-fed, those who enjoy privilege and popularity (vv. 23-26).

This message must have astounded those who heard Christ. But in the course of Christian history, this element of grace to the poor and judgment to the rich became watered down. Slowly the Christian Gospel became concerned mainly about the 'other' world. But the other world *is* the Kingdom, which has come and is yet to be fully manifested. This world and the other world cannot be separated so easily.

It is only in our century that we have begun to see this good news to the poor coming within the possibility of realization. Some countries in Europe (East and West) and North America have been able to lift up the poor to a certain tolerable standard of living. Most of the once-poor in these countries have now enough to eat and drink and to clothe themselves with. Luke 6:21 is being fulfilled before our eyes. This has in its turn led to a 'rising tide of expectations' and a 'backlash of frustrations' in most other parts of the world, but perhaps especially in India.

If you examine the context of the beatitudes, you will see the kind of people to whom Christ announced the good news of the Kingdom (Mt. 4:23 ff: Luke 6:17 ff). They were the sick, the afflicted, the paralytics, the blind, the lame; not necessarily the religious and political

leaders or the ruling classes, though they too might have been part of the crowd.

The terms which we translate ‘poor’ or ‘poor in spirit’ mean much more than just those who do not have money. The Greek word *Ptochos* (poor man) stands for one who is subject to all kinds of misery and oppression. And it was to such that Christ offered the Kingdom.

‘Blessed are you miserables! For yours is the Kingdom of God’ (Luke).

‘Blessed are the broken in spirit, for theirs is the divine Kingdom’ (Mt.).

‘The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them’ (Mt. 11:5 cf: Luke 7:22).

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to announce the Lord’s time of acceptance (Luke 4:18-19).

These are all words spoken by Jesus. The passage in Mt. 11:5 is the answer to the implied question. ‘How can we recognise the presence of the Kingdom?’ The passages in Luke 4:18-19 is the way Christ announced the content of his own mission, and the fulfillment of the promise of the Kingdom. In Luke 14:15-24, the Kingdom is illustrated by the parable of the banquet for the poor. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-28), the hero is a poor man.

St. Paul reminds the Galatians; that an important element of the reconciliation worked out in Jerusalem between the party of James and the party of Paul was that all should ‘remember the poor’ (Gal. 2:10). Perhaps the Pauline presentation of the Gospel did not emphasize this adequately in the beginning. Later on, the collection for the poor at Jerusalem became a primary concern with St. Paul (Rom. 15:26, II Cor. ch. 9).

St. James, on the other hand, had this concern for the poor from

the beginning (James 2:2-15; see especially James 5:1-6). He says quite Plainly:

‘Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs to the Kingdom But you have dishonoured the poor man’ (James 2:5, 6).

What concretely brings release and rejoicing to the poor and the oppressed is already a sign of the presence of the Kingdom. Blessed are ye poor. For yours is the Kingdom.

QUESTIONS

1. Look up other passages in the New Testament which put the poor at the centre of the Church’s Concern, e.g., Acts 2:44-45; 2 Cor. 8:2 ff; Mt. 19:23 ff; Mt. 25:31-45 etc.
2. In what way can we put the poor back at the centre of our concern?
By giving more charity?
3. Where are the signs of the presence of the Kingdom today? That is, where do the poor hear good news?

2

Looking for the Coming of the Kingdom

Isaiah 25:1-9

One-third of the world today is nominally Christian. There are almost a thousand million Christians in the world. In India we have some 15 million Christians - Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. What difference does it make? Or what difference should it make to our nation? That is the question. Are Christians supposed to be just another minority group working for their own communal rights and privileges, struggling against the majority of Hindus and Muslims?

In most of the countries of Asia (except perhaps in the Philippines), Christians are a numerically small minority. What is God's purpose for us in our nations? We cannot as Asian Christians look back to a time when 'Christendom' or 'Christian nations' were a fact of history, as Western Christians can.

How do we find a way to become a dynamic presence in our own nation? India, with her poverty and injustice, dishonesty and corruption, hope and frustration, lack of leadership and initiative, is one of the saddest nations of the world today. Is there some good news that we can be and bring to our people?

Christ the King came into the city of Jerusalem seated on a donkey. He came healing and serving. He brought joy to the down-trodden and the oppressed, to the lame and the paralytic, to the blind and the deaf. He came as light for the world in darkness, bringing joy and hope (Jn. 3:19; 12:46). And he said of his disciples, in his great high-priestly prayer, 'As Thou didst send me into the world, so have I sent them into the world' (Jn. 17:18). Our presence in the world then has to be on the same lines as that of Christ's.

The Old Testament looked forward to the presence of the Saviour God. The 25th Chapter of Isaiah gives us some understanding of

what the prophet expected to happen when God comes (25:1-2). He has already done ‘wonderful things’, which are the basis of expecting more wonderful things to happen when He comes in person.

1. 25:2-5: What are the things He has done?

(a) He has judged the mighty nations that were oppressors. This is historically true in part, and in part it is yet to happen. The great empires of Alexander and Julius Caesar, of the Pharaohs and of Nebuchednezzar, of the Portuguese and the Spaniards, have all fallen. Their remains are mostly in ruins today. Even the more recent colonial empires of West European nations are now in the process of crumbling; a new form of economic oppression and exploitation, which we today call neocolonialism, is now spreading, awaiting the judgement of God. The poor nations are becoming poorer, while the rich get richer at the expense of the poor. We do not yet see the judgement of these nations and groups within our own nation but that cannot be far behind. God’s judgement of the rich and the oppressor has been partly fulfilled, and still yet awaits full consummation in the future.

(b) God has been a refuge for the poor, the protector of the needy and the oppressed (25:4). This is also partly realised and partly to happen in the future. We see that the working classes in many countries have begun to experience the redemption from oppression and want. But in nations like ours, millions are still poor, still oppressed. There is no shelter for them from the storm of grinding poverty and no shade from the heat of widespread famine.

The kingdom has come in Jesus Christ. The poor have had the good news preached to them. But the total fulfillment is still a matter for future realization.

This future gets some content in the remaining part of Isaiah 25.

II. 25:6 - 8:

(a) The most appropriate symbol of the Kingdom of God is that of a banquet.

(b) Note that the banquet of the Lord is not just for the people of Israel, but for all nations (v.6).

(c) The banquet is rich and sumptuous - not skimpy and bare.

(d) The symbolism of wine is that of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of forgiveness and joy, of creativity and holiness, of righteousness and peace.

(e) The word translated the 'veil' in v. 7 could also mean the 'shroud' - the covering for dead bodies or for mourning people. The symbolism is particularly apt for India, where the 'shroud of gloom' spreads over all areas of our national life. The banishment of sorrow and suffering, misery and pain, belonged to the heart of the Kingdom as the prophets saw it. They expected the coming of the Messiah to be the occasion for lifting the shroud of gloom cast over all nations.

(f) The destruction of death is part of the messianic expectation (v. 8). A gospel that speaks only of material well-being is a perversion of the biblical message. 'Eternal life' is the quality of life that lives in this world without being enslaved by the fear of death, which knows that if this tent of our body is destroyed, we have a heavenly tent not made with hands (2 Cor. 5:1 ff). The Christian concern is not only for the 'good life' in the image of holiday resorts and vacationing centres. The good life, which accepts this world and rejoices in it, is also a life that transcends this world and triumphs over death. The 'wiping away of tears from all faces' (v. 8) means also giving people a transcendent hope, as well as giving them meaning, purpose and sustenance in this life.

III. 25:9: Only when in practice *both* these concerns of the Christians become real to themselves and to others, our talk about God will have any meaning for them. The God for whom India waits is a God who is both interested in and does things for the immediate economic, social and political problems, and at the same time brings victory over death itself; the God who not only punishes in his wrath and forgives in his grace, but the God who dispels famine and want, oppression and exploitation, pain and misery, hatred and dishonesty; the God who judges the oppressor and vindicates the oppressed; the God who gives life to those who live in the valley of the shadow of death.

In India we Christians need to realise the wide range of salvation

that God brings - not just the individual salvation in the 'other' world, but corporate and national salvation here and now as well.

QUESTIONS

1. In what terms have you been taught in the Church to think of Salvation? Is this teaching true to the Bible?
2. How do we understand the messianic expectations of the prophet Isaiah in relation to the hopes and fears of India today?

3

The Nature of the Kingdom

Mt. 13:1-25

The kingdom of God is the central message of the Gospel. In the Gospels, especially in Luke, the verb 'evangelise' has often for its object not people but the Kingdom. To 'evangelise the Kingdom of God' means to proclaim the good news that the kingdom has already come (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16; Acts 8:12). In Luke 9:2, Christ sends out the twelve to 'proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal.' When the crowds come to Jesus, he speaks to them of the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:11). In the Acts, it is the arrival of the Kingdom of God that is the content of the apostle's message - not any kind of personal salvation in the coming world (Acts 1:3; 14:22; 19:8). Christ asks his disciples to make the object of their ultimate concern the Kingdom of God - 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things (food, clothing, shelter), shall be yours as well' (Mt. 6:33).

But what is this Kingdom which is thus the central concern of the Christian Church? The Kingdom cannot be easily defined. It was announced to the disciples in parables. They did not clearly understand. But some were attracted by it, fascinated and drawn to it without knowing fully what it meant. In this and the following study we shall look at seven of the parables of the kingdom, in order to begin to understand the Kingdom in its rich and diverse meaning.

The first of the seven parables in Matthew 13, that of the sower and the different fields, is well-known to us. We need only to draw some lessons for our time from it.

Here the emphasis is neither on the sower nor on the seed, but on the different types of field which receive the seed. The seed is the 'Word of the Kingdom' (13:19), and the field is humanity. Men receive the word of the Kingdom in many different ways and respond to it differently, with different results in their lives. The nature of the personal response is at the heart of this parable. Let us look at the narrative to bring to light some of its essential aspects.

13:1-2:

The Context: Great crowds are around the Master, fascinated by his personality, attracted by his many miraculous acts of healing, arrested by his authoritative presence which dared to question the religious leaders and disputed with them without fear. Many came looking for healing. Others came to be entertained, or out of curiosity. Many might have been attracted because they felt like sheep without a shepherd, and found in this man a true good shepherd. The point is that many came. Why don't the crowds come when our preachers go out to preach? Because the 'signs of the Kingdom' are not there. Words alone cannot draw people. The quality of life, lived in integrity and prayer, disciplined and well-trained, brimming with the power of God that performs miracles - that was the presence of Christ, who could also speak words of power. Today, our words flow, but the quality of life is lacking. So president Radhakrishnan could say, 'Christians are ordinary people making extraordinary claims.' We need to regain that quality of extraordinariness which made the words of Christ and his disciples through the centuries capable of speaking with power.

13:3-8; 18:23:

The different areas of the field where the seed fell have their own qualities.

(a) *The Path* (v. 4) The path typifies the kind of persons who listen to everything, but cannot take things in (v. 19). They are the majority of people in the modern world, where there is so much traffic, so much 'communication' through the mass media, so many comings and goings, so many travels and conferences, so many millions of words poured into one's ears. But it is like a beaten track. Everybody has access to it. It cannot, however, receive the seed, because it is so smooth on the outside, but hard and without any opening to the depths. Most of us have become like that, and the seed of the Kingdom falls on us, but it never takes root in us.

(b) *The Rocky Ground* (vv. 5, 6, 20, 21): This is another kind of superficiality found in many of us. We are eager to receive good

words. We think we have become good Christians simply because we can listen to a good preacher, respond to him emotionally, and generally agree with him (v. 20). Everything goes well when the environment of the college, the religious group, and the spiritual clique is pleasant and congenial for a 'religious emphasis.' But when one leaves the congenial environment and goes into the another society where different sets of values operate, then all the 'religious interest' of the student movement or youth club days disappears. When a small problem or opposition to the 'religious interest' appears, the seed of the Kingdom disappears from the mind. 'Having No depth' (v. 5); too many of us are like that.

(c) *The Thorny Area* (vv.7, 22): This is the kind of commitment to Christ which one tries to keep as one among many other interests. One goes to student movement or religious group activities, as one goes to the tennis or hockey club, to a dramatic society, to the debating society, or to the music club. After a while one finds that many of the other activities are much more interesting and these 'thorns' grow up and choke the seed of the Word. The Kingdom demands total and absolute loyalty. Not that one cannot engage in sports, acting or drama and debate if one is a Christian. The point is that the Christian commitment cannot be put on the same level as these other interests. The other interests have to be integrated from the centre - to the commitment to the Kingdom, to the joy and truth and beauty and justice of God. No single integrating commitment - many of us are like that. And so the thorns choke and destroy.

(d) *The Good Soil* (vv. 8, 23): The mark of the good soil is always its capacity to bear fruit. And let us not misunderstand the 'hundredfold, sixty and thirty' of verses 8 and 23 as referring to the number of 'souls' we save by our personal evangelism. When the Bible speaks of fruit, it always means *righteousness or unrighteousness*, a quality of life, of acts (see Mt. 3:8 ff, Luke 3:8 ff, Mt. 7:16, Mt. 12:33 ff, Rom. 6:22). Gal. 5:22 ff clearly speaks about the fruit of the spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, reliability, humility and inner strength. These are the qualities that the Kingdom ought to create in us. And they are all very relevant to the situation in our nation today.

Christ's Method of Teaching (13:10-17): Christ did not teach the same way as the writer of this present study is doing. He was not always discursive and logical. He often said things which sounded almost absurd and illogical - like asking people to pluck out their eyes if they caused them trouble. Responding to the Kingdom requires a different kind of listening from the manner of listening to our college or public lecturers. It demands a response from the depths, with the will fully engaged, as well as the mind and the emotions. The message of the Kingdom calls in question the logic by which we keep our minds as arbiter and norm for all decisions. The Gospel puzzles and perplexes, in order to open the depths of understanding. Parables are meant to puzzle and to attract only the serious-minded. The great opportunity is there (v. 17). When you are exposed to the word of the Kingdom, what kind of ears do we bring to it (v. 9)? Can we respond from our depths, or are we like the well-trodden path, the superficial soil, or the type with many interests but no integrating principle and commitment? He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

QUESTIONS

1. Does the kingdom of God use a different language and literary form from the class room or public lecture method? In what does this difference consist?
2. Is there a special way of listening and responding to the good news of the Kingdom, different from the way we listen to our lecturers or speakers? If so, what is the difference?

4

More Parables of the Kingdom

Mt. 13:24-52

Here are six more parabolic illustrations of the Kingdom. Let us list the seven parables:

1. The Seed and the different fields (13:3-22).
2. The wheat and the weeds (13:24-30; 36-43).
3. Seed of mustard (vv. 13:31-32).
4. Yeast in three measures of flour (v. 33).
5. The field with the buried treasure (v. 44).
6. One pearl of great value (v. 44).
7. Net which gathered the good and the bad fish (vv. 47-50).

These parables illustrate different aspects of the Kingdom.

(a) In the first four of them one finds the idea of growth. The Kingdom is something which appears in time and spreads or grows. It does not come fully developed.

(b) In 2 and 7, there are clearly the ideas that the Kingdom is present along with the reality of evil, and that there is to be a day of sorting out when the evil will be finally destroyed. Both these parables refer to the 'end of the world' or 'the close of the time' on (vv. 39, 40, 49).

(c) Parables 1, 2 and 7 emphasize the personal element of salvation. The seed that fell on good soil is he who bears fruit (v. 23). The wheat in parable 2 signifies a 'son of the Kingdom' while the weed symbolizes the 'son of the evil one' (v. 38). The symbolism of the good fish and the bad fish in parable 7 is obvious. In our understanding of the Kingdom we must not forget the fact that God does distinguish between good men and evil men (not necessarily between Christians and non-Christians or believers and unbelievers here).

(d) In parables 3 and 4, the corporate aspect of the Kingdom is obvious; but even in 1, 2 and 7, it is implied. In parables 1 and 2, there

is only one field - the world (v. 38). In parable 7, it is one net which gathers all the fish (v. 47). In parable 3, the whole Kingdom is compared to a tree, where the birds of the air can find shelter (v. 32). In parable 4, the Kingdom and the world are as indistinguishable as Yeast and flour (v. 33), completely mixed with each other. Yet we know the Yeast is there, though we cannot see it, and we know that it is transforming the whole of the three measures of meal.

(e) In a sense, there is a contradiction between what parables 2 and 4 say. The second says the process of history is one in which both good and evil are growing side by side - the wheat and the weeds are both growing apace. There is definitely the activity of the enemy who has sown the weeds among the wheat (vv. 25, 28, 39). The process has to be sifted out on the last day, the day of judgement. On the other hand, parable 4 has an element of what is often called universalism - the whole three measures of flour are leavened by the little yeast of the Kingdom. There is nothing to be thrown out. That is the point of having so many parables. The whole truth cannot be fitted neatly into one story. There is mystery and paradox at the heart of reality.

(f) Parables 1, 5 and 6 refer to a certain quality of response and search required in order to see the Kingdom and gain access to it. Parable 1 speaks of the good soil as one who hears the word and grasps it, and is therefore able to bear fruit. Parables 5 and 6 speak of the necessity of staking everything for the sake of the kingdom. The demand for commitment is total and absolute. It is not just believing that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and therefore knowing that one is personally saved. The demand of the Gospel is insistent. Forsake everything and follow me - friends, family, riches, position, future, career. Let all of that become insignificant in comparison with the one pearl of great price, the field with the buried treasure, to buy which you have to sell everything you have (v. 44). The Kingdom is free, but not cheap.

(g) The illustrations are all chosen from the life of the hearers - the farmer who sows and reaps, the woman at home who mixes dough, the man who plants a tree or buys a field, the merchant of

pearls, the fisherman, and so on. Christ had this uncanny ability to take the most ordinary experiences of life and make them windows on the reality that lies behind and beyond all the sense-data, the presence of the Kingdom of God. We need to recover this ability to see the reality of God in all the events of our contemporary history in India, as well as in all of nature, and to interpret them to others in a way that draws attention to God and to His Kingdom.

(*h*) But we should be very careful not to be too logically systematic in our interpretation of the Kingdom. It still remains an unfathomable mystery. We can only begin to understand and grasp it. It will always be full of surprises. It remains God's Kingdom, and He alone knows what is its final fulfillment. We must retain this sense of essential mystery about the Kingdom. Christ asked his disciples: 'Have you understood all this?' And they said 'yes' (v. 51). But it is clear that none of us fully understand. And therefore he adds that final and eighth parable: 'Therefore every teacher trained for the heavenly Kingdom can be compared to a head of a household, who goes into his treasure - house to bring out new things as well as old' (v. 52). Some of these new things will constantly be coming up in history to challenge our ways of understanding God and His plans. We should be alert at all times to anticipate how the new changing times require new and fresher understandings of the same mystery of the Kingdom which has been in the world from olden times.

QUESTIONS

1. Do the parables challenge and question our usual understanding of the Gospel? If so, at what points and in what way?
2. How do we find a fresh interpretation of the Gospel of the Kingdom that is relevant to the issues of our day and is at the same time true to the Bible?
3. The first four parables were spoken in the presence of the crowds. The interpretation of the first two, as well as of the three last parables, was given only to the disciples (vv. 10 ff; vv. 36 ff). Why?

5

The Presence of Christ in the World

John 16:16-24; 15:4-13

A great mystery is contained in these words of Christ in St. John's Gospel. We should give heed to it. Only so can we avoid misunderstanding the meaning and modes of Christ's presence in the world.

'A short time - and no more you see me; again after a short time, you will see me' (v. 16). The apostles could not understand that.

What is the nature of this 'short time' when we do not see Christ? And when is the end of this short time when we shall behold Him again ?

In any case the time in between is a time of sorrow and suffering (v. 20), at least for Christians - while the world may be making merry on its own. But it is creative suffering - like the labour pain of a woman about to give birth to a child. And the pain, if it is not the pain of despair, must lead to the joy of bringing something new into the world (v. 21).

The time in which the Christian lives is a time for sharing in a life of creative suffering - not for living the easy-going, easily successful, popular and pleasant life.

We can undertake this vocation to suffer in the interests of others, because we have a joy to look forward to when we meet the Master face to face.

But does not the time look long and the work endless? Is it not 2000 years since Christ departed from this earth to 'go to the father'? Has he forgotten us and our world of suffering and injustice, famine and disease, illiteracy and superstition, oppression and exploitation, war and cruelty, poverty and misery?

No, and here is the great mystery for the Church because we do see Him face to face. We rejoice the 'short time' is already over, and

we rejoice in the midst of a life of suffering, and no one can take away the joy from us (v. 22). This is the strange paradox of the Church's life on earth. Christ has come back and is with us. After the risen Lord appeared to the apostles, the apostles 'returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God' (Luke 24: 52).

He said to them before he parted from them, 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of this age' (Mt. 28: 20).

The long drag of time becomes transformed for us because of the risen and ascended Christ who continues to be present with us 'to the close of the age.'

But how is He present?

FIRST: *By our abiding in Him and He in us, through love:* 'If you remain faithful to my orders, you will continue to abide in my love. Just as I remained faithful to my Father's orders and so continue to abide in His love. These words I have said to you so that the joy which is mine may be yours as well, so that your rejoicing can become full. And my orders are simple: Love each other as I have loved you. There is no love greater than this - to offer up one's life for those whom he loves' (Jn.15:10-13).

To open our hearts wide to the amazing love of Christ, by which He was willing to sacrifice his own life for our sake - that is our source of joy. From that opening up and positive response to His wondrous love comes the capacity to love others as He loved, and to serve them at the cost of our own lives, our careers, our pleasures, our success in this world, our comfort and our convenience. And when our life becomes one that is continuously opening up to his love, and continuously serving and loving those in need - then His presence becomes real to us. Time becomes no longer something to kill, boring and dragging. Time becomes short; life becomes full of joy in the midst of pain and suffering. This is the true personal faith; we believe not just in order to save our souls. Our souls have been saved by Christ's loving self-sacrifice. To live in that knowledge is the motivation for loving, self-sacrificing service and the source of incessant joy in the midst of suffering.

SECOND: *His presence is through the Holy Spirit:* The Gospels and Acts make it clear that the life, death and resurrection of Christ constitute a series of events which culminate in the outpouring of the Spirit. Christ said to His disciples that when he ascends to His Father, the Spirit would come (Jn. 14:16, 17, 26; 15: 26; 16 :7 ff, etc.). The Spirit is Christ's presence in His disciples, i.e., in the Church. He is the creator Spirit who works from the beginning in all creation (Genesis 1:2), but He is present in a special way in the Church. Through Him Christ is known, and the community of faith is built up in Christ. He is the Spirit that reveals the will of God to the Church, prays through the Church in accordance with the will of God. He fills the community with his gifts, when the community awaits them in faith. He is Christ present in the Church and through the Church to the world.

THIRD: *Christ is present in the world through the actions of his disciples, i.e; the church, in the world:* As our Lord said in His high-priestly prayer: 'Now I am no more in the world, but they (the disciples) are in the world, and I am coming to Thee As thou didst send me into the world so I have sent them into thy world (Jn.17:11-18). The actions of His disciples in the world are to bear the 'name of Christ'; that is to say, they are to be the expressions of the personality of Christ. That is the basic meaning of 'name' in Hebrew - an expression of personality. We are Christ's presence in the world.

FOURTH: *He is present in the righteous actions of all men:* There are several other modes of Christ's presence and action in the world, but one that should not be overlooked is His presence wherever the poor and the oppressed are vindicated; wherever there is genuine love and self-sacrificing service; wherever the goodness, the beauty and the truth of God are manifested in the actions of all men - whether they be Christians or not. He is also present where the oppressor is overthrown, the rich sent empty away, the proud are scattered, the mighty are put down from their thrones (Luke 1:51-53). This is generally spoken of as God's action in history through redeeming love and evil-destroying wrath. But He is present not only through the great historical events, but also through the often unrecorded patient work of ordinary men in ordinary life - whether they be scientists, labourers, farmers, professors, artists or journalists.

Our concern is to be able to discern as well as bear Christ's presence in the world. The two poles of this concern will be the object of our next study.

QUESTIONS

1. The promises of Christ are on the one hand that He would return at the end of the age, and on the other that He is always with us to the end of the age. How do we reconcile these two promises?
2. Are suffering and joy opposed to each other? Or can they both be experienced by the same person at the same time?
3. What should be our attitude to those who are not Christians in the light of the insight that Christ is present wherever justice and righteousness are vindicated?

6

Our Presence in the World The Royal Priesthood of Christ

I Peter 1:22 - 2:10

What is the nature of our task as Christians in a world of poverty and injustice? There is no better phrase that catches the whole of that task as the expression ‘royal priesthood’ which occurs in the present passage. But both words need interpretation.

The expression itself comes from the Old Testament. In Exodus 19:1 and 6, the Lord says to the people of Israel through Moses: ‘If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own special people among all the peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a *kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*’ These are the words echoed in 1 Peter 2:5 and 2:9.

The whole epistle of Peter is thought to have been based on a sermon preached on the occasion of the baptism of new converts during the feast of Easter. One can imagine the newly baptised men and women, clad in white robes, assembled probably in one of the Catacombs of Rome before sunrise on Easter Sunday. The apostle stands before them explaining to them the meaning of their baptism, and giving the Christians their commission for life in the world. It parallels the Lord Yahweh giving his commission to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.

As in the Sinai covenant, in the Christian covenant of baptism also the first element is the call to *holiness* (1 Peter 1:14 ff). What does it mean to be holy? We are often inclined to disregard the call to holiness altogether, or see it only in negative and pietistic terms.

Hope, Faith and Love are the positive aspects of holiness. The Epistle begins with an affirmation of hope (1 Peter 1:3 ff). Hope is not wishful thinking; a living hope, in the Bible, is the point of orientation of our whole life. It is the looking forward to the coming

of Christ and His kingdom. In 1:13 the apostle exhorts his hearers to set their hopes fully on the grace that is coming at the open manifestation of Christ. Our hope as Christians is centered around the risen Christ, present in the world in a hidden way, to be clearly and openly present in the world at 'the last day.'

In 1:7, the apostle speaks about the need for the genuineness of their faith to be tested by various trials and by suffering. Faith is that quality of strength, reliability, unshakability and freedom from anxiety that comes to us when we are firmly established in the love and grace of God. We can become fully conscious of this faith only when things begin to turn against us, and our usual strength and support is gone. In trials and troubles, in the face of opposition and persecution, the early disciples learned that the power of God supporting them in a hidden and interior way could uphold them against the strongest waves of opposition. The martyr demonstrated the strength of this inner faith by his fearlessness before the oppressive might of the powers of this earth. In India today we need this quality of inner strength which is not afraid of opposition and is full of hope in the face of obstacles, a faith which trusts, and relies upon the power of God to sustain us in trouble and tribulation.

In 1:22, the apostle exhorts the newly-baptised to sincere, earnest, deep, brotherly love. By subjecting themselves to baptismal teaching and by becoming part of a community of love and faith and hope, they have begun to be purified. That purity and holiness has to be continually developed, through sincere and self-sacrificing love towards others. Love in the New Testament is neither a feeling nor just liking others. It is the quality of mutual self-surrender and active concern for the welfare of others.

These three, then, are the positive elements of holiness - (1) hope, looking forward to the coming of Christ, and not to our own success and comfort;

(2) faith, being established solidly in Christ and therefore free from unreliability, dishonesty, anxiety and deceptiveness; and

(3) love, patiently surrendering oneself to others and being actively engaged in their welfare.

The negative aspect of holiness consists in 'not being squeezed into the mould of blind passion' - not being led by one's instinctive desires and lusts (1:14). It is not simply that these passions are sinful. They are actually misleading and deceptive. They promise you gratification, as the serpent promised Eve in the garden of Eden. In the end, however, they deceive. They give you, the moment's pleasure, but not lasting satisfaction. The best of contemporary literature in the west is today devoted to the theme of the deceptiveness of physical passions. Many intelligent men and women in all parts of the world have revolted against the puritanical, restrictive ethics of previous centuries and sought to assert their freedom by taking a positive attitude towards sensuality. For many it was a liberating experience in the beginning. But later one finds it is as enslaving as the puritanical ethics against which one revolted.

The weakness of the puritanical ethics lies in its basically negative framework. It seems to keep on saying: Don't do this and don't do that and you will be holy. But this is basically contrary to the Bible. The New Testament encourages eating and drinking but every negative injunction is followed by a positive demand for utilising our creative energies in the service of others. True holiness is achieved by the combination of hope, faith and love expressed in worship and daily life. Give your strength and time to prayer and worship and the loving service of your fellowmen, and the passions will gradually be conquered.

Our ability to become a 'kingdom of priests' or a 'royal priesthood' is conditioned by this call to positive holiness. *But what does 'royal priesthood mean?*

In the Book of Exodus, it clearly means that the nation of Israel is to serve as a priestly nation on behalf of the other nations of the earth. In other words, Israel, without any special merit on her part, is called to a special degree of intimacy with God. But not for her own sake - rather for the sake of the nations. 'All the earth is mine' (Exodus19:5). They are to stand before God as a priest for the other nations.

This is also the calling of Christians, of the Church.

We are a people gathered from all the nations of the earth, not because of any special merit in us, but by His gracious calling, to a life of close intimacy with God. That is what distinguishes us from those who are not Christians. Not that we are saved and they are doomed. Rather, we have been given the privilege of knowing Christ, and through Him of living in great, close intimacy with God. But this is a great responsibility as well. We cannot take this call lightly and expect that we will be automatically holy. First we must keep in mind the two poles of our calling, namely, that it is out of His free grace that God has called us, and therefore that the call does not make us any better than others. There is no room for feeling superior to others. Second, our calling is always to an existence on behalf of others, Christians and others. This is what priesthood means. A priest is always one who lives to intercede for others and not for himself. And all of us have been by baptism incorporated into the one eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ who ever lives to make intercession for the whole world. Our priesthood is a part of this ministry of universal intercession.

But holiness is always a call. It demands a responsive action. 1 Peter 1:16 says: 'Be holy, for I am holy.' It is a demand and a gift. The demand is to grow up by the spiritual milk of the word (2:2), to put away all bitterness, resentment, malice and hatred (2:1), to love one another earnestly (1:22), and to come to Christ and to be built up by His Holy Spirit to become an abode of the Spirit and a holy priesthood (2:4, 5), offering up our own lives along with that of Christ on behalf of all men (2:5), and to announce by word and deed the marvellous grace of God that has called us out of the deceptive pleasures of this life, into the joyous light of expectant faithful, loving service and worship (2:9).

QUESTIONS

1. *Examine the whole of the first epistle of St. Peter to see how in apostolic times Christians were asked to conduct themselves as a holy nation. How much of it applies to our times?*
2. *How can our Christian communities become a holy people today in our present situation in India?*

Christian Presence and the Royal Priesthood

(Continued)

John 10:1-18

The priesthood of the Church belongs to every member of it. It is a participation in Christ's priesthood. We have such a highpriest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens (Heb. 7:26), who 'has entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf' (Heb. 9:24), who 'holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever' (Heb. 7:24), and 'lives for ever to make intercession' (Heb. 7:25). 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace' (Heb. 4:16), 'for we share in Christ if only we hold our first faith firm to the end' (Heb. 3:14).

This is not usually taught in youth movement circles, but this belongs to the heart of our mission in the world. Failure in holiness and in the priestly ministry of sustained intercession for the world lies at the base of our contemporary failure in mission. Our ministry demands the holiness of hope, faith, and love, and the continuing life of disciplined prayer if it is to share in Christ's ministry.

But what exactly does the word 'royal' mean in the expression 'royal priesthood?' In the Old Testament it clearly meant 'a priestly kingdom', on behalf of other kingdoms. But in the Book of Revelation, the concept takes on a new meaning. Revelation 1:6 has at least two versions in the Greek. One version says, '(Christ has) made us (Christians) a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.' Another version says, '(Christ has) made us (Christians) kings and priests for His God and Father.'

In Revelation 5:10, the meaning becomes clear. The four living beings of the vision of St. John fall before the Lamb, and they sing a new song:

“Worthy art thou to take scroll and to open its seals:
 For thou wast slain and by thy blood ransomed for God
 From every tribe and tongue, and people and nation
 And made them into a kingdom and priests to our God
 And they shall reign on the earth.’

The kingship or lordship, as we call it, belongs to Christ the God-man. But it is given to us as well. And it is this kingship which God has given to mankind that forms the second aspect of the mystery of the royal priesthood.

We basically misunderstand the lordship of Christ only as lordship or kingship over us and over the creation. That is true, but not the whole truth. Christ shares his kingship with other men. We share not only in his priesthood, but also in his kingship. We are also ‘royal’ because we belong to the household of the great king.

But we misunderstand the kingship of Christ as well as our own participation in it, if we take our image of a king from the arbitrary rulers of history - Ashoka or Akbar, Alexander or Augustus. The dialogue between Pilate and Jesus is very instructive here. Pilate asks Jesus: ‘Are you the king of Jews?’ (Jn. 18:33). Jesus replies with a question: ‘Are you asking for yourself, or did others say it to you?’ Pilate says something irrelevant in reply, and Christ continues, ‘My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of the worldly kind, then my servants would have fought, so that I would not have been handed over to the Jews. But my kingship does not belong to the same class as the kingship of this world’ (18:36).

The inscription ‘Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews’ does not appear on a throne but on the top of a cross. The Old Testament made a basic distinction between a king and a shepherd. Israel had no king but God, but they wanted one because everybody else had one. Read the amusing story in I Samuel 8:4 ff on how they finally got a king, Saul, head and shoulders above the ordinary people (I Sam. 9:2). But when Saul became an oppressor, God chose a shepherd boy, David, to be king, The Messiah was expected to be a shepherd-king. It is in this light that we have to understand Christ’s description of himself as ‘the good Shepherd.’

The passage in John 10:1-18 describes the qualities of the good shepherd, of the real messianic King. Some of these qualities are to be specially noted, as the exercise of our sharing in Christ's kingship.

1. The shepherd knows the sheep intimately, and calls them by name, and the sheep recognise his voice as a voice that can be trusted, because it always acts in their best interests (10: 3-5).
2. The shepherd leads the sheep out of the confinement of the sheepfold into the wide open pastures, goes before them, and feeds them (10:3, 4, 9, 10).
3. The shepherd stays by the sheep even when the wolves come, face the wolves, and when necessary lays down his life in defence of the sheep. (10:11-15).
4. The shepherd works in order that all the sheep may be brought into one fold (where all can be fed by the same shepherd) (10:16).

1. We need to develop such intimate and detailed knowledge of the world so that we know each sheep by its name. This is not merely academic knowledge of the world, but intimate personal knowledge gained by actual 'living with the sheep.' Our way of life should win for us authenticity. The world should be able to recognise the voice and actions of the church as always speaking in the best interests of the world and not for selfish purposes. We must by our way of life earn our credentials for being respected by the world. This comes from the holiness of hope, faith and love, and from loving, self-sacrificing service to the world.

2. We have always to help in the process of leading men from their confinement into the open field of a better life. We should become pioneers who show the way by daring to do new things, to challenge old confining fears, to lead people into the fullness of life, and be with the world in all its aspirations for food and freedom.

3. Such creative pioneering in finding freedom and food for the sheep will soon invite the wolves who want to feed on the sheep - the oppressor and the exploiter, armed with great power, cunning and

avarice. The Christian community takes the full brunt of the opposition of the wolves, and does not forsake the sheep for fear of the wolves. This identification with the poor to the point of death, in the face of opposition from the oppressor and the exploiter, is an integral part of the royal priesthood.

4. The Good Shepherd and those who share in His shepherdly ministry are anxious that ‘there should be one shepherd and one fold.’ This means, labouring for the one united Church under the one Shepherd, Christ. But it means more. It means also committing ourselves to one world, a single humanity, in which the welfare and destiny of each member is the concern of all and the welfare of all, the concern of each. To work to establish a single worldwide structure, economic, social and political, with full freedom and diversity, but without injustice, oppression and mutual exploitation, belongs integrally to our royal priesthood.

The royal priesthood thus consists of two elements: (a) the priestly element of a holy or set-apart community which exists for the whole of humanity, grows in holiness by growing in hope, faith and love, and continues in Christ’s ministry of intercession, and (b) the pastoral, kingly or shepherdly ministry of identification with the aspirations of the world, close intimacy with all mankind and especially the poor, creative pioneering, fearless facing of opposition even to the point of death, and working for the unity of the Church and for a single worldwide structure of justice and welfare for all humanity.

QUESTION

1. What is the relation between holiness and mission?
2. Can there be true Christian service of our fellowmen which is not sustained by a life of prayer and intercession for them?
3. How can our youth and student groups give expression to the royal priesthood in the conditions of India today?

8

Recapitulation

II Cor. ch. 4

The royal priesthood, which corresponds to the kingly and priestly ministries of Christ, is the aspect of the kingdom given especially to Christians. How in practice do we express this ministry as young people?

The whole New Testament speaks in answer to this question. Let us in this last study recapitulate some of the elements that we have already encountered in the passages so far studied, and in related ones.

(1) *Grasp the meaning of our baptism:* Baptism is introduction into a new life - the life of royal priesthood. This is the life of an ongoing community, the Church, which participates in the eternal ministry of Christ. The first epistle of Peter makes this clear. 'And baptism saves you, not by removal of bodily uncleanness, but the pleading of a clear conscience in the presence of God, through the risen Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, who has entered heaven with angels and authorities subject to him' (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism is initiation into the heavenly community which lives in the presence of God, enabling us to join in the service of God. Those who practice Chrismation (Muron) as an integral part of their baptism (and not as a separate sacrament of confirmation) should know that the holy oil anoints them to the priestly, prophetic and kingly ministries of Christ.

(2) *Grasp the kingly priesthood:* The ministry of priesthood is on behalf of the whole creation, and not a means of personal salvation which is already given to us as a free gift. Our fundamental orientation of life then becomes that of the first part of the Lord's prayer. 'Father in heaven, Thy name be hallowed, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, in earth as in heaven.' We do not seek any other objective for our ministry as Christians in the world, except this concern for the

coming of God's kingdom over the entire earth. That the hungry may find food, that the oppressed may be set free, that justice and righteousness may be established in society, that the world may rejoice in God - these form our ambition as Christians living in the world.

(3) *Prepare to express the kingly priesthood* - by training for a ministry of self-sacrificing service for the kingdom. If possible find channels for engaging in such service along with others right now. Our service may be in village work, in urban social work, in teaching, in healing, in building, or in pleading the cause of the poor, in labour union work, or in the ordained ministry of the Church. Let our youth and our academic career be a time of training by practice in the art of serving others without dominating them or using them for our own gratification. Let us respect those whom we serve, and consider it our privilege to be able to serve them. The Master came to serve and not to be served. We have the same role.

(4) *Express the royal priesthood* - by engaging fully in the ministry of worship and prayer. Make the Eucharist the centre of our life of prayer. We should not regard the Holy Communion (Holy Mass or Lord's Supper) as an occasion when Christ gives us his grace by feeding us. That is only part of the Eucharist. But primarily it is a participation in Christ's eternal act of self-offering on the cross. When the bread and the wine are lifted up and offered to God in Christ, we are offering ourselves, our bodies, our minds, our souls, our abilities and all we have to God in Christ in an act of loving self-immolation to the gracious and loving Father; not to appease Him, but because He is worthy of all, and our gratitude to Him can be expressed in no lesser way.

In the Eucharist we should learn to offer up the problems of our people and of the whole of humanity to God. We have a responsibility to lift up the sufferings and yearnings of those with whom we live and whom we know well. We must feel in ourselves and directly experience the poverty and misery of our people, and must intercede for the poor and the miserable and the oppressed with deep personal concern. Only that way the service we render to our fellowmen will receive the quality of authenticity. The Eucharist is the mode in which

the sufferings of this world are linked up with the sufferings of Christ on the cross, through the conscious act of the Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. But this must become a reality in our worship life, and a reality in our daily life.

(5) *Develop our life of continuing intercession for the world:* Christ is unceasingly interceding for the world. We should participate in this continuing ministry of intercession, not in order that we may spiritually grow, but rather in order that life and joy may come to the dying and the miserable. As busy students and hard-working people, we may not have long hours to engage in sustained prayer. The tempo of our technological civilization demands new forms of prayer life. The most accessible to all today is the habit of 'Ejaculatory' Prayer. This is from time to time to say in the depths of our hearts 'Lord, have mercy on the poor', or such short one sentence prayers, which can be said on any occasion when a lecture gets boring, when we have to wait for somebody, while walking to the college or to our home, etc. The content of these prayers should also become concrete whenever possible, like 'Lord, have mercy on our nation, and deliver us from famine, from corruption' etc. In the early morning, even while remaining awake in bed, we should lift up our hearts to God in loving, adoring thanksgiving and worship. Only thus can the subconscious mind be cleansed.

(6) *Devote our energies to creative service:* Youth is a time when the energy available seems to be in excess of the needs. Tremendous resources of muscular, mental and emotional energy make it difficult for us to control them as we wish. Real growth in the royal priesthood takes place only as we 'yield our bodies to righteousness for sanctification' (Rom. 6:19). The fight against personal impurity and uncleanness cannot be a frontal fight. It can be successful only when we use our bodily energies and emotions to work in the service of others. St. Paul asks us to 'present our bodies as a living sacrifice' to God (Rom. 12:1). The body, with the muscles, the nerves, the mind, the emotions and the will, is to be engaged in the 'spiritual worship' of the royal priesthood. The battle against personal sin is partly won in the fight for social righteousness and in dedicated, devoted service to others.

(7) *Become pioneers with others in bringing freedom and justice in the world:* Let us use our mind and our imagination to find ways of pioneering in fighting oppression and injustice in our societies. The Christian Church started schools, hospitals, and other institutions which have now become the common property of all - including those who are not Christians. This is our continuing ministry in the world - to be pioneers of new forms of good. We are not to imitate the world. 'Do not be squeezed into the mould of this age' (Rom. 12:2-a). Our task is to be transformed ourselves, and become a transforming influence in society, by attesting (demonstrating) what the will of God is for our time and place (12:2-b). When there is black-marketing and hoarding of food in our society, as intelligent students and young people, it is our job to find means to prevent such acts and to expose those who practice them. If our officials and leaders are corrupt, it is our job to bring the corruption to light. But this kind of destructive criticism may be too easy. We must also show new ways of doing things which change the structures of corruption and oppression, and at the same time inspire others to integrity and self sacrificing service. Creative pioneering is the main vocation of a minority Church.

(8) *Finally, be ready to accept failure* - and to lay down our lives with faith, hope and love. Christians should not be naive enough to think that by our pioneering action, our society will become a paradise overnight. The cross was apparent failure, ineffective in saving the world. But out of the apparent failure have come the great movements of emancipation and welfare of our day. We should not anticipate either success or general approval, in direct response to our actions. To act in faith is to be despised and rejected and to fail apparently, as part of the calling of the suffering servant (Isaiah 53).

(9) *In all things render thanks to God, and wait for his full manifestation.* Our job is to work within our mandate, with joy and thanksgiving. His presence, open and unveiled, will also bring the day of final release, final salvation, when the whole earth shall rejoice in the light of God. It is the anticipation of this final, open triumph of God in Christ that makes Christians an extraordinary people who never lose courage (2 Cor. 4:1-11).

(10) To serve these purposes, help to make the Church a creative fellowship, where honesty, integrity and love are the binding forces, and where hypocrisy and mutual competition and deceit no longer rule. 'Come to him (Christ) to that living rock, rejected by men but in God's sight, choice precious; and like living blocks of rock be yourselves built into a house of the Spirit, to exercise the holy priesthood of offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2:4-5).

QUESTIONS

1. What are some possible forms of pioneering social action in India today?
2. How can the role of a Christian student or young person be understood within the royal priesthood of the whole Church?
3. How can baptism and its meaning become more of a reality to Indian Christians today?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

(For written work by individual young people, to be read later to a group):

1. If the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5, 6 and 7) is to be taken as an indication of what Christ meant by the Kingdom of God, how would you relate it to the problems of India today?
2. What did baptism signify in the New Testament with its Jewish background? Study in this connection the following passages:

Mark 1:4-11 (compare Mt. Ch. 3)

Acts 19:1-7

Romans 6:1-14.

3. How does the death and resurrection of Christ become effective for the salvation of the whole of mankind, with special relation to poverty, oppression and injustice? In this connection, try to see the relation between personal righteousness and social righteousness.

Especially see: Mt. 23:23-28; 25:31-46

Romans 2:1-24; 5:15-21

Ephesians 2:10; 4:17-5:2.

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