

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS<sup>1</sup>

**I**N the forefront of Christ's preaching is the conception of the kingdom, a highly complex notion which has been variously interpreted. To some it appears as a kingdom not of this world at all: it is either a kingdom which He expected to come in its final and perfected form at the end of His own life—an eschatological kingdom—or a purely spiritual reality established exclusively in the depths of men's hearts without any outward organization. The main fault of these interpretations lies in their exclusiveness, for a careful examination of the concept reveals a richness which extends to both interpretations and far beyond them. The kingdom in its perfection is attained hereafter, and in that sense is eschatological; it is truly spiritual and demands inward loyalty. But it is also realized, however, imperfectly, in this world; and it is realized as a visible organized society, as well as a new and breath-taking allegiance.

It is in St Matthew's Gospel where the expression occurs most frequently<sup>2</sup>; and there it is 'the kingdom of heaven', corresponding to the Jewish custom of refraining from use of God's name, while in Mark and Luke 'the kingdom of God' is used.

The Gospels develop a notion already familiar from the Old Testament, and even there highly complex. He who claimed not to destroy, but to fulfil the law, must have meant to convey in His message about the kingdom something of the authentic meaning it possessed in the Old Testament writings. It was not there, but in the minds of His contemporaries, even of His own disciples, that a narrow nationalist conception had prevailed, with all the stress laid on the external organization and apparatus of ruling. Their final recorded question related to *that* kingdom, and at the very end they looked for a striking triumph over earthly rulers: 'Wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts i, 6)?' The truer notion was of a kingdom inaugurated by the Messiah in this world, partly through His approach to men's hearts and partly an external, organized body, but perfectly established in heaven at the end of time (cf. Daniel vii, 27; Wisdom iii, 8-9). Before the exile Yahweh was seen as exercising His rule over Israel, afterwards more as the universal king. All these aspects are

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally envisaged as part of a larger work in Apologetics. Unfortunately there was not time to revise it for its present use.

<sup>2</sup> Fifty-one times; 14 in Mark, 31 in Luke. Cf. M. J. Lagrange, O.P.: *L'Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Gabalda, Paris, 1923), p. clvi (the principal source, together with Yves de la Brière: art. *Eglise*, in the *Dictionnaire Apologétique de la Foi Catholique*, for this article. For a brief and simple treatment of the subject, see also: Fr Lemonnier, O.P.: *The Theology of the New Testament*.

included in the ideal of the kingdom as expounded in the synoptics, and Israel's part in preparing the world for the advent of the kingdom is clearly described.

The main division is between the kingdom of the hereafter and that which is manifested in this world. Both are possible meanings of the Greek word *Basileia*; but the distinction is best rendered in English by the use of the term 'realm' or 'kingdom', for the clearly-defined territory where God's rule is perfect, and 'reign', for the imperfect kingdom of this world with its shifting and uncertain territorial extension and where there is never perfect obedience to the law of God. Briefly, there is the eschatological *kingdom*, the land of the hereafter where the just live with God after death, and the *reign* of God, which is the extension of His sovereignty on earth. The distinction is clear, but it is not possible to relate any particular text exclusively to either conception; in the actual utterances of Jesus only the difference in emphasis can be perceived. For 'in His conception, and by virtue of His personal action, the reign of God inaugurated by Him becomes a kingdom on earth . . . The reign of God is a veritable kingdom of God on earth, but much inferior to that of the Father which will receive only the just . . . The kingdom most often is eternal life, prepared from the origin of the world, to which the just will be admitted. But the notion of a territorial kingdom could be applied also to the messianic reign, represented thus as an external society established on earth . . . It would not be wrong to relate this kingdom to the Church of which Peter will be the foundation'.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of the references to the kingdom undoubtedly place the emphasis on the life to come. It is a final reward for 'the poor in spirit' and the persecuted (Matt. v, 3, 10; Luke vi, 20), for the humble and forgiving (Matt. xviii, 3, 23-35), for the child-like (Matt. xix, 14; Mark x, 14-15; Luke xviii, 16-17), for those who keep the law in its fullness and fulfil God's will in reality (Matt. v, 19-20; vii, 21), for those who choose a hard way of chastity (Matt. xix, 12), and in a special way for the disciples (Luke xii, 32). Riches hinder the approach to it (Matt. xix, 23-4; Mark x, 23-5; Luke xviii, 24-5), but a late start does not make any difference to its attainment (Matt. xx, 1-16); nevertheless anything which might stand in the way of gaining the kingdom must be ruthlessly cast out (Mark ix, 46). After a final judgement at which the sheep will be separated from the goats (Matt. xxv, 31-46), the kingdom will appear in its perfection as a social gathering of the just in perfect communion with one another and with God (Matt. viii, 11-12; xiii, 43; xxii, 2-14; xxv, 1-13; xxvi, 29; Mark xiv, 25; Luke xxii, 16-18).

<sup>1</sup> Lagrange: op. cit., pp. clvii, clxii, clix, clxii.

The prelude to that perfect kingdom is in this world, an imperfect but real dominion of God which continues over long ages before the final separation between good and evil is achieved. This reign of God is presented sometimes in a more or less confused manner, with the perspective prolonged into the future life ; sometimes it is a grace offered to men now, impelling a fateful decision ; at other times it is a genuine kingdom already established on earth.

A kingdom, the outlines of which are indistinct, but which is clearly to be established in the world, is the subject of the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. iii, 2), and of Jesus' first message as well as of His disciples (Matt. iv, 17, 23 ; Mark i, 14-15 ; Matt. ix, 35) ; it is even imminent, approaching, long before the consummation of the world (Matt. x, 7). We are asked to pray that the kingdom should come, as the context indicates by the fulfilment of God's will on earth 'as it is in heaven' (Matt. vi, 10 ; Luke xi, 2) ; a kingdom that *comes* is distinct from the kingdom hereafter, to which we *go*. The sons of Zebedee sought a place in the kingdom which they naturally expected in this world ; but the answer need not be wholly a reference to the future life (Matt. xx, 21). The scribe who perceived the primary importance of charity was assured that he was very near to this kingdom (Mark xii, 34).

The kingdom therefore appears also as a proffered grace : 'The reign is there as a divine proposition. It is necessary to decide, to take sides for or against.'<sup>1</sup> Everything else, all material considerations, must be subordinated to the search for the kingdom of God and His justice ; that is to say, the dominion of God over men in this world (Matt. vi, 33 ; Luke xii, 31). The disciples were given a special initiation into its mysteries, to know better than others what the grace implied (Matt. xiii, 11 ; Mark iv, 11 ; Luke viii, 10). It has a varied reception (Matt. xiii, 19) ; it is sometimes found in the midst of evil things and will not appear in its full purity till the end of time (Matt. xiii, 24) ; it should be regarded as more valuable than all one's worldly wealth, as a treasure and a pearl of great price (Matt. xiii, 44-5). A humble, childlike reception is recommended, so that through the proper response to the kingdom as a proffered grace we may enter the clearly defined kingdom of the hereafter (Mark x, 15).<sup>2</sup>

The acceptance of grace also means entry into a kingdom already present ; not merely a 'reign', because outwardly organized and visible ;

<sup>1</sup> Lagrange : op. cit., p. clx.

<sup>2</sup> Here the two main uses of the term 'kingdom' are quite clearly distinguished. In the previous verse the present tense is used in reference to a future kingdom, because it has been prepared from all eternity. These verses provide a background for vv. 23-5. M. J. Lagrange, O.P. : *Évangile selon Saint Marc* (Gabalda, Paris, 1911), p. cxxxii.

nor merely a kingdom of the future, because existing in the conditions of this life. The pharisees reject grace and even now prevent men from entering the kingdom (Matt. xxiii, 13); the chief priests neglected the grace offered by John the Baptist and therefore the publicans and harlots, who believed his message, will precede them into the kingdom (Matt. xxi, 31); because the Jews have failed, the kingdom will be taken from them and given to a nation which will bear its fruit—'a nation', producing visible effects by reason of belonging to the kingdom, these are clearly the conditions of the present time; the parable of the wedding feast (Matt. xxii, 2-14), though it leads up to a final exclusion from the kingdom of the hereafter, undoubtedly refers to the establishment of a kingdom on earth as an historical fact. The call to its acceptance is now urgent, and those who are most vigorous in their response will successfully gain the kingdom (Matt. xi, 12; Luke xvi, 16). John the Baptist as a precursor is not so great as lesser men who are in the kingdom (Matt. xi, 11), yet he must be equal or greater in the eternal kingdom. The question about degrees in the kingdom (Matt. xviii, 1-5) implies a present institution, especially in view of the parallel passages which only speak of the greater and the lesser in a general way (Mark ix, 32-6; Luke ix, 46-8). It is a kingdom which grows and develops, in time, as a grain of mustard seed (Matt. xiii, 31; Mark iv, 30; Luke xiii, 18) or as leaven (Matt. xiii, 33; Luke xiii, 20-1); it contains good and bad, with great variety of members and of treasure which they can enjoy (Matt. xiii, 38, 47, 52); out of the kingdom (already existing) the angels will gather all scandals at the end of time (Matt. xiii, 41). Calling attention to the power with which He works miracles, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is present among those to whom He speaks (Matt. xii, 28; Luke xi, 20); directly answering the question 'When shall it come?' He claims that it is already present 'within you' (Luke xvii, 21).<sup>1</sup> To some of the twelve He promised that the kingdom would come before their death (Matt. xvi, 28; Mark viii, 39; Luke ix, 27): a text which the eschatologists quote as evidence of our Lord's conviction that He would soon return in triumph, but which can more reasonably be understood as a reference to a veritable but less perfect establishment of the kingdom in this world.

After this general examination of the different uses of the term 'kingdom', the inadequacy of the eschatological theory becomes more obvious. From such texts as this last and Matt. xxiv, 34 ('this generation shall not pass') its exponents argue that the conception of the imminent establishment of the kingdom in triumph was that of our Lord; otherwise the texts would not have been left in the gospels after the writers had perceived them to be contradicted by events. Nevertheless, the

<sup>1</sup> For the meaning of this verse which some have taken as a proof that the kingdom is wholly internal and spiritual, see p. 243.

evangelists corrected them by words of their own, suggesting a different form of kingdom and an outward organization of the Church which grew from their experience—direct or indirect—of our Lord's friendship but which was not part of His original design. This theory is shown to be impossible (i) because based exclusively on an interpretation of the texts in question which is at least not the only possible one; (ii) because the evangelists, notably Matthew, can be shown to represent accurately the mind of Christ; (iii) because these authentic words of Christ relate to a kingdom inaugurated in this world in an imperfect state of preparation for the eternal; (iv) because the whole conception of the kingdom is far grander, richer than this and—however difficult—expresses a real harmony between the different usages of the term.

(i) 'There are some of them that stand here, that shall not taste death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom' (Matt. xvi, 28). These words come at the end of a passage on the necessity of renouncement in order to attain salvation. But they do not necessarily refer to the coming of the Son of man in judgement, already mentioned in v. 27, but seem to introduce a new perspective; to the hesitant they might offer a word of encouragement: to gain the kingdom in the fullest sense, they must renounce all, but they will be comforted at an early date by the inauguration of the kingdom in its relative perfection. Such an interpretation is confirmed by the other texts above-mentioned which could not possibly refer exclusively or even primarily to an eschatological kingdom. 'This generation shall not pass, till all these things be done' (Matt. xxiv, 34), as already explained, is best understood as an answer to one of two distinct questions, namely that which relates to the destruction of Jerusalem. Even if these interpretations were much less solidly based, they would still be sufficiently plausible to render very uncertain a theory *wholly* built up on an interpretation which isolates the texts from all other references to the kingdom.

Other possible views are that the promise refers to the Transfiguration mentioned in the next chapter or to the judgement on Jerusalem vividly shown forth in the destruction of the city in A.D. 70, within the lifetime of some of the disciples.

(ii) According to St Matthew the risen Jesus possessed all power in heaven and on earth, and thus had entered into His kingdom. It is therefore perfectly consistent to speak of a proximate coming in His kingdom. 'It is true that Matthew speaks also of a coming which must be very near to the consummation and even coincide with this last end. But he does not describe it in quite the same manner. At the end, the son of man will come with His angels, in the glory of His Father (xvi, 27), in His own glory with all His angels (xxv, 31), or He will send His angels (xiii, 41). And yet He was present in His kingdom, since He was with His own (xviii, 20 and xxviii, 20). If we really wish

to reconcile these texts, we must say that the first taking possession of the kingdom was followed by a return to heaven which did not prevent a spiritual presence; but we must take great care not to deny the very real inauguration of the reign of which the Gospel has so often spoken. 'It is discreet, manifested to the apostles, to whom henceforward are entrusted the preaching, the recruiting of subjects, the administration of the kingdom (xix, 28) under the direction of Peter (xvi, 18). The manifestation of the final advent, with the angels, will be more solemn, and it is that which Matthew calls the *parousia* (xxiv, 3, 27, 37, 39), thus comparing it to the solemn visits of a sovereign in one of his states.'<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this whole chapter by its juxtaposition of the two events, the destruction of Jerusalem and the final judgement, manifests an origin earlier than A.D. 70, being written in the ignorance which v. 36 proclaims as inevitable.

The careful preparation and training of the apostles, the elaborate organization of the Church, as described in St Matthew's gospel, cannot be reconciled with an early advent of the final kingdom. Yet the references to these things are found in the parables which contain the best of Jesus' teaching and in sayings which bear the clearest signs of time and place (xvi, 18). The critics attribute such texts to the Jewish-Christian spirit: 'Which is a simple admission that they are completely primitive, and precisely the expression which is suitable to the thought of Jesus.'<sup>2</sup> And no matter when the gospel was written, St Paul's efforts to organise the Church are only explicable in an atmosphere where the *ideas* of a permanent and organized community extended to the whole world according to the will of Christ were current. 'In reading Matthew it is possible to misunderstand the harmonious arrangement of the discourses—which is his work, partly no doubt based on the catechesis, but we can hear Jesus speak.'<sup>3</sup>

(iii) As already pointed out, the kingdom is often presented against the background of the present life: it grows and develops, it contains good and evil, its members suffer trials, it is given to the Gentiles, it requires a new code of morality envisaging a long period of observance: 'Such a parallelism (between the Old and the New Law) gives the impression that the New Covenant, as until lately the Old Covenant, must endure in this world for a whole succession of ages'.<sup>4</sup>

(iv) The reign of God in this world, itself a real kingdom, is separated from the eternal kingdom by 'the end' or 'the consummation (*sunteleia*) of the world' (Matt. xiii, 39, 40, 49; xxviii, 20). The duration of the earthly kingdom is not precisely indicated, but it appears to be very long indeed: It must be long enough to allow for the preaching of the Gospel of the kingdom to all nations, 'and then shall the consummation

<sup>1</sup> Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. clxvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. clxix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. clxxii.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionnaire Apologétique*: art. cit., col. 1232.

come' (Matt. xxiv, 14; cf. xxviii, 19); to allow for the leavening (Matt. xiii, 13); to leave an adequate interval between sowing and harvesting—as the reference is to the *cosmos* (Matt. xiii, 38), the literal half-year must be extended to embrace a cosmic work: 'The entire world now enters upon new destinies'.<sup>1</sup>

No narrow definition of the kingdom, therefore, will suffice. It is of the next world, but not merely there; it is a spiritual, inward reality in this world, but it is more than this, for it possesses an external organization. 'In a word, the "kingdom of God" is the whole activity of Divine Providence directing men to their eternal end; it is the whole activity of Jesus Christ the Redeemer; it is the entire epic of salvation.'<sup>2</sup>

What is the relation between the kingdom and the Church? In one sense the two might be identified, and that—to the believing Catholic—the truest and fullest meaning of the Church: the mystical Body of Christ which includes in its membership those who have reached the eternal kingdom, those who have received the kingdom proffered as an internal grace in this life, and those who belong to the visible communion by profession of the same faith and acceptance of the same rule. But as we are here concerned not with the elucidation of faith, but with its rational and historical foundations, we must restrict ourselves to a view of the Church as it appears in history; then it is 'something of the "kingdom"; it is not the whole "kingdom"'.<sup>3</sup> Or it may be said: 'The reign of God is the programme of Jesus; the Church is the means of carrying it out'.<sup>4</sup>

The Church, therefore, may be identified with the kingdom in its social aspect; and the texts which attribute an external organization to the kingdom are rightly understood to relate to the Church. These alone would exclude the possibility of a merely spiritual kingdom; but in addition to these there is ample evidence that our Lord made His disciples leaders in a visible society, fitted out with all the means necessary to attain its end, and destined to endure to the end of time. It is through the presentation of this evidence that the views of Harnack and Sabatier and their followers can be shown to be inadequate, but one last reference to the kingdom needs to be examined before then:

And being asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them, and said: The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. Neither shall they say: Behold here, or behold there. For lo, the kingdom of God is within you (Luke xvii, 20-21).

Does 'within you . . . *entus humon*' mean that the kingdom is always, and under all circumstances, purely internal? This could not

<sup>1</sup> Lagrange: op. cit., p. clxvi.

<sup>2</sup> Yves de la Brière: art. cit., col. 1247.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A. Tanquerey. *Synopsis Theologiae Dogmaticae*, Vol. I, Paris, 1927, p. 390 n.3.

be, in view of the texts which speak of the social character of the kingdom; nor could it contradict these. The fact was that the pharisees had a worldly conception of the kingdom and expected a prodigy announcing its advent. Jesus answers their question, clearly distinguishing the coming of the kingdom from His own final coming which will be visible and accompanied by striking signs (v. 24), by saying that it is there indeed, perceptible but not strikingly so: the reign of God is inaugurated by the preaching of Christ, is in their midst as a proffered grace and can be in their hearts if they will accept it.

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## TRENDS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

### II

IN a previous article<sup>1</sup> some consideration was given to recent trends in Biblical interpretation for the most part among non-Catholic writers, and attention was drawn to the renewal of interest in the spiritual or typological sense. The subject was taken up by Catholics both in England and in France early in the recent war. The German occupation of France was followed by a remarkable outburst of intellectual activity on the part of the French, and Biblical study had its place in this. Père de Lubac, S.J., one of the most prolific of modern French Catholic writers, has published remarkable introductions to Origen's Homilies on Genesis and on Exodus. His aim is clearly to correct many impressions about Origen which he considers to be false. In his introduction to the Homilies on Genesis<sup>2</sup> de Lubac sets out to disprove the almost universally-held view that Origen not infrequently denies the existence of the literal sense of Scripture. Origen's intense devotion to Christ made him seek a spiritual sense in all Scripture. If he said there were some episodes purely spiritual from which one cannot get any literal sense, he appears only to have meant that one should take the passage as figurative or metaphorical. In other words he confused the terms 'spiritual' and 'figurative'. Or again, when he said that certain Bible episodes were not histories he seems to have meant that they did really happen, but if they had *only* their literal historical meaning there would be no sufficient reason for their happening at all, and we should be obliged to say they never happened. That is, many events of the OT took place chiefly because they were intended by God to prefigure some mystery of the NT, *op. cit.* p. 51. Origen's

<sup>1</sup> See SCRIPTURE, April 1950, p. 175 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Origène, *Homélie sur la Genèse*, in the series: *Sources Chrétiennes*, edited by Pères H. de Lubac and J. Daniélou, S.J.