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THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN JESUS' MESSAGE

A b s t r a c t. In Jesus the Father wanted to establish the covenant definitely. Christ is the incarnate revelation of God who is “rich in mercy.” The Father's love is freely given in Jesus through the Spirit. Jesus perceived this as being the Kingdom of God that was to come through him into the world as God's unconditional love which knows no limits in fulfilling the age old promise of salvation for every person and the whole of creation. “To carry out the will of the Father Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth” (LG 3).

Key words: Kingdom of God; Jesus Christ; Church.

Jesus himself expressed his mission in these words: “I came to throw fire on this earth and how much I want to see it burning” (Lk 12:49). Jesus was driven by a vision that he compared with “fire” and which Paul will call later “dynamite” (1 Cor 4:20). It was definitely not to be understood as a theoretical world view. Jesus' vision aimed at a radical transformation of the world that would upset everything and in no way leave people in peace. As he himself put it: “Do you suppose that I was sent to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Lk 12:51).

What is this *fire*, this *dynamite*, which he came to throw into this world and with which he himself was apparently burning? To ask this question is

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to search for the key which unlocks for us the real message of Jesus, to seek the overriding arch that binds it together. The most basic historical fact of Jesus' life is the symbol which dominated all his preaching, the reality that gave meaning to all his activities, that is, the *Kingdom of God*.

The Kingdom is so central to Jesus that it led Karl Rahner to the observation: "Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, not himself."¹ In his teaching Jesus appears as the representative (Lk 17:20-21), the revealer (Mt 11:25-26), the champion (Mk 3:27), the initiator (Mt 11:12), the instrument (Mt 12:28), the mediator (Mk 2:18-19), and the bearer (Mt 11:5) of the Kingdom of God. We could even say that the topic of Jesus' preaching was not himself nor was it just God; it was God in his relation to the world.

1. THE NOTION AND THE NATURE OF GOD'S KINGDOM

The notion of "God's Kingdom" was not invented by Jesus or the early Church; it has deep roots within the theology and history of Israel.² The coming of God's Kingdom (God's Reign) was used by Jesus of Nazareth as the keynote of his mission. In the Synoptic Gospels it remains a central theological symbol through which major dimensions of Jesus' teaching and ministry are to be understood.

Jesus never defined the Kingdom of God. He described the Kingdom in parables and similes and in concepts like life, glory, joy and light.³ The best biblical description of God's Kingdom is in Paul's Letter to the Romans 14:17: "For God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of the righteousness, peace, and joy which the Holy Spirit gives." The Kingdom of God, defined in a brief formula, is justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The Kingdom of God, contrary to what many Christians think, does not signify something that is purely spiritual or outside this world. It is the totality of this material world, spiritual and human, that is now introduced into

¹ K. RAHNER, W. THÜSSING, *Christologie systematisch und exegetisch* (Freiburg, 1972), 29.

² The expression *Kingdom of God* appears only one in the entire Old Testament in the deuterocanonical book of Wisdom 10:10: "She showed him the Kingdom of God and taught him the knowledge of holy things." There are nine references in the Old Testament to the *kingdom* over which Yahweh rules, and some forty-one references to Yahweh as *king*. The phrase *Kingdom* or *Reign of God* is therefore basically a New Testament formulation. See: *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by M. Glazier (Wilmington, 1987), 851-856.

³ Cf. J. BRIGHT, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville, 1953), 17-18.

God's order. E. Schillebeeckx defines the Kingdom of God in the following mode: The Kingdom of God is the saving presence of God, active and encouraging, as it is affirmed or welcomed among men and women. It is a saving presence offered by God and freely accepted by men and women which takes concrete form above all in justice and peaceful relationships among individuals and peoples, in the disappearance of sickness, injustice and oppression in the restoration of life of all that was dead and dying. The Kingdom of God is a new world in which suffering is abolished, a world of completely whole or healed men and women in a society where peace reigns and there are no master – slave relationships – quite a different situation from that in the society of the time. As things are there “it may not be so among you.”⁴ The Kingdom of God is a changed new relationship (metanoia) of men and women to God the tangible and visible side of which is a new type of liberating relationship among men and women within a reconciling society in a peaceful natural environment.

Recent theology has rediscovered the Kingdom of God as an eschatological reality. This rediscovery has led to the distinction between the Kingdom of God in its eschatological fullness and the Kingdom of God present in history, that is, between the “already” and “not yet.” The ambivalence of the texts regarding the imminence or the already installed presence of the Kingdom of God must be taken note of.⁵ To the eschatological Kingdom of God belongs the eschatological activity of the Spirit. They cannot be separated. The final coming of the Kingdom was present for Jesus because the Spirit of the eschatological age was active in and through him.

⁴ Lk 22:24-27: “An argument broke out among the disciples as to which one of them should be thought of as the greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the pagans have power over their people, and the rulers claim the title ‘Friends of the People’. But this is not the way it is with you; rather, the greatest one among you must be like the youngest, and the leader must be like the servant. Who is greater, the one who sits down to eat or the one who serves him? The one who sits down, of course. But I am among you as one who serves.’” Cf. E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church: The Human Face of God* (New York, 1990).

⁵ G. LOHFINK, “The exegetical predicament concerning Jesus’ kingdom of God proclamation,” *Theology Digest* 36(1989), 108: “The tension between the fact that the kingdom can be accepted, is grammatically expressed by its nearness. The kingdom of God is within grasp, but not as long as Israel refuses to repent. Seen in this light there is no longer any contradiction between texts which speak of the future of the ‘basileia’. The well-known summary of Jesus’ preaching in Mk 1:14 is amazingly consistent: The promised future is now. The time is fulfilled. Nevertheless, God’s kingdom is not simply there. God cannot force it. It is offered to Israel. It is still a possibility within reach, what is still outstanding is not the ‘basileia’, but Israel’s repentance and faith.”

The Gospel of Mark begins the narrative of Jesus' ministry with a programmatic summary of his early preaching of the Gospel of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). The coming of the Kingdom is God's own doing, though it calls humans to repentance, conversion and faith. The Kingdom is conceived here as impending and imminent.

In other texts, however, Jesus is reported to affirm that it is already being inaugurated, indeed that it is already present and operative. God has inaugurated his Kingdom in the world and in history in Jesus Christ through his words and his works. Having read in the synagogue of Nazareth from Isaiah's announcement of the preaching of the Good News (Is 61:1-2),⁶ Jesus commented: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21), indicating that God's Kingdom was already breaking through in him. In the controversy with the Pharisees about the way in which he cast out demons, Jesus declared: "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt 12:28). God's Kingdom is already present.

Since Jesus himself is God's ultimate offer to us, then he is God's Kingdom present in the world. Jesus is the Kingdom in person, the 'auto-basileia'. "The proclamation and establishment of God's Kingdom are the purpose of Jesus' mission: 'I was sent for this purpose' (Lk 4:43). But that is not all. Jesus himself is the 'good news', as he declares at the very beginning of his mission in the synagogue of Nazareth when he applies to himself the words of Isaiah about the Anointed One sent by the Spirit of the Lord (cf. Lk 4:14-21). Since the 'good news' is Christ, there is an identification between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing and being. His power, the secret of the effectiveness of his actions, lies in his total identification with the message he announces: He proclaims the 'good news' not just by what he says or does, but by what he is."⁷

The Kingdom of God, inaugurated in history in Jesus, must grow through it in order to reach its eschatological fullness at the end of time. God's Kingdom is present as a seed that must continually grow and for whose growth

⁶ "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn."

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (RM)* (Città del Vaticano, 1991), n. 13.

we must pray: "Thy Kingdom come" (Mt 6:10; Lk 11:2). The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for the "in between time", for the "already" of the "not yet." The future of God's Kingdom remains to be seen: the time of the sinful will have passed (Mt 19:28; Lk 17:26-30); sufferings will disappear (Mt 11:5); there will be no more mourning (Mk 2:19); death will be no more (Lk 20:36); the dead will rise up (Lk 11:5); the foundations of the old order will crumble: "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mk 10:31); the one who makes himself little shall be great (Mt 18:4); the humble shall be masters (Mt 5:5); the oppressed shall be freed (Lk 4:18).

Jesus exulted with joy at the sudden irruption of God's Kingdom, of which he was not only the witness or the herald, but the instrument. In the "already" of the sudden breaking through of the Kingdom of God in him, he saw the promise of its full accomplishment in the "not yet."

2. THE PURPOSE OF THE KINGDOM

The Kingdom of God is the realization of a fundamental utopia of the human heart, the total transfiguration of this world free from all that alienates human beings, free from pain, sin, divisions and death. Jesus not only promised this new reality but already began to realize it, showing that it is possible in the world. He did not come to alienate human beings and carry them off to another world. He came to confirm the Good News: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed [...]" (Lk 4:18-19).

The Kingdom of God is at the center of Jesus' preaching and mission, of his thought and of his life, of his words and works.⁸ The theme was known before him and was conceived differently by various preachers in contemporary Judaism. The latest among these was John the Baptizer, at whose hands Jesus himself was baptized (Mk 1:9-11), for whom the Kingdom of God was imminent divine judgment. Jesus' concept of God's Kingdom was, however, new and original. For Jesus, the Kingdom was symbolic of the new "rule" God will bring about in the world, renewing all things and restoring all relationships between God and human beings as well as among people. The

⁸ J. DUPUIS, "Evangelization and Kingdom Values: The Church and the 'Others'," *Indian Missiological Review* 14(1992), 9.

coining of God's Kingdom is totally and completely God's work, and totally and completely the work of human beings. Working for the Kingdom of God means acknowledging and promoting God's activity and plan of Salvation in all its fullness.⁹

For Jesus, too, the Kingdom of God was impending; indeed, it was not only at hand but had already begun to break through in his own mission. Jesus announced it as the irruption of God's rule among people, by which God manifests God's glory. The Kingdom of God that Christ announces is not a liberation from this or that evil, from the political oppression of the Romans, from the economic difficulties of the people, or from sin alone. The Kingdom of God cannot be narrowed down to any particular aspect. It embraces all: the world, the human person and society, the totality of reality is to be transformed by God.¹⁰

In the first place the Kingdom of God concerns persons. It demands their conversion. Jesus calls to conversion and penance. This call is an essential part of the proclamation of the Kingdom: "[...] repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Conversion means changing one's mode of thinking and acting to suit God, and therefore undergoing an interior revolution. Being converted does not consist in pious exercises, but rather in a new mode of existing before God. Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. Sin must be judged in the light of the coming Kingdom of God. Sin means that we refuse to let the power of the Kingdom determine the direction of our lives. The Kingdom wants to free us from the constant temptation to be our own masters and to determine the world in our way. God must give man a new heart. Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him. Only when God becomes the Lord of our whole life and the Lord of the whole universe will the fullness of the Kingdom be accomplished.¹¹

⁹ RM 15; See J. NEUMANN, *Idea zbawcza Królestwa Bożego* (Warszawa, 2000).

¹⁰ See L. BOFF, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for our Time* (New York, 1978), 55.

¹¹ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* (London, 1994), n. 1430-1433. "Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, 'sackcloth and ashes', fasting and mortification, but at the *conversion of the heart, interior conversion*. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance" (n. 1430).

It is urgent that one open oneself to God. This demand goes so far that Jesus threatens us with the following harsh words: "If you do not change your way of thinking and acting, you will be perish" (Lk 13:3.5). The flood is imminent and it is the final hour (Mt 24:37-39). The ax has been put to the root of the tree; if it will not bear fruit, it will be cut down (Lk 13:9). The owner of house will close the door and those that are late will hear these sad words: "I don't know where you come from" (Lk 13:25). For this reason, those are called prudent who understood this situation of radical crisis and opted in favor of a Kingdom, making a choice capable of supporting and conquering all temptations (Mt 4:24-25).

To become a child in relation to God is the condition for entering the Kingdom: "[...] I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child" (Mt 18:3-4). For this, we must humble ourselves and become little. To become "children of God" one must be "born from above" or – born of God" (Jn 3:7; 1:13; 1:12). Jesus' demand of "becoming a child" expresses the necessity for adults to make a new beginning, to have a new responsiveness and openness to God and other people. We are asked to learn or relearn the ways of God. Only then we rediscover lost potential and gain integrity and wholeness.

3. THE WAYS OF THE KINGDOM'S PROCLAMATION

Jesus' invitation to enter his Kingdom comes in the form of parables, a characteristic feature of his teaching: "Jesus preached his message to the people, using many other parables" (Mk 4:33). Jesus accompanies his words with many "mighty works and wonders and signs," which manifest that the Kingdom is present in him and attest that he was the promised Messiah (Act 2,22). The meaning of God's Kingdom Jesus presented in symbolic actions such as healings and exorcism, table fellowship with sinners.

The theme of the Kingdom of God undoubtedly places God at the source and at the heart of Jesus' action. The Kingdom of God really stands for God's beginning to act in the world in a decisive manner, becoming manifest and putting order in creation. This is done through Jesus' human actions. The relationship of the healings to the preaching of Jesus is explained in the message to the Baptist in prison: "Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought

back to life [...]” (Mt 11:4-5).¹² The miracles of healing and the exorcism that generally figure among the unassailable historical data of Jesus' early ministry – the “miracles of nature” as well as the resurrections from the dead – all are signs and symbols that through Jesus, God is bringing about God's rule on earth, overcoming the destructive power of death and sin. They are the ways of the Kingdom's proclamation among people.

The significance of Jesus' miracles as a constitutive part of the inauguration of God's Kingdom is clearly marked by the evangelists. Suffice it to recall Jesus' programmatic preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth, where healings figure among the signs, foretold by Isaiah 61:1-2, which are part of the Kingdom of God's already effective presence. On the level of activity, Jesus' miracles demonstrate that God wants to repair the brokenness of human existence, and allow us to participate in his own life. Healings, as well as exorcisms, demonstrate the presence of God's Kingdom in the world now. They indicate the kind of world the Kingdom ushers in. When the Kingdom of God arrives, sickness and disease must simply disappear.

Jesus taught in parables. Apparently the parables of Jesus say nothing that concerns him directly. They explain the way in which God inaugurates God's Kingdom on earth, the way in which it grows, and the conditions to enter it. Yet, at the same time, they also manifest Jesus' awareness of being the “beloved son” in whom the Kingdom of God and the end-time are being established (Mk 12:6).

Jesus and the presence of the Kingdom in this world are secretly at the heart of the parables.¹³ They are the most characteristic form of Jesus' way of speaking. They are Jesus' own method and most appropriate vehicle for understanding the Kingdom of God. Through his parables he invites people to the feast of the Kingdom, but he also asks for a radical choice: to gain the Kingdom, one must give everything (Mt 13:14-45); words are not enough,

¹² CCC, n. 547-550. “The signs worked by Jesus attest that the Father has sent him. They invite belief in him. To those who turn to him in faith, he grants what they ask. So miracles strengthen faith in the One who does his Father's works; they bear witness that he is the Son of God. But his miracles can also be occasions for ‘offence’; they are not intended to satisfy people's curiosity or desire for magic. Despite his evident miracles some people reject Jesus; he is even accused of acting by the power of demons” (n. 548).

¹³ In the parable we can distinguish four principal points: it tells a story (narrative); it has two levels of meaning (topical or figurative); its purpose is to persuade, convince, convert (rhetorical); its lesson always has to do with the interrelationship between the divine and human (religious, ethical). Cf. N.F. FISCHER, *The Parables of Jesus Glimpses of God's Reign* (New York, 1990).

deeds are required (Mt 21:28-32). One must enter the Kingdom, that is, become a disciple of Christ, in order to “know the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven” (Mt 13:11). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms: “Jesus' invitation to enter his kingdom comes in the form of *parables*, a characteristic feature of his teaching. Through his parables he invites people to the feast of the kingdom, but he also asks for a radical choice: to gain the kingdom, one must give everything. Words are not enough, deeds are required. The parables are like mirrors for man: will he be hard soil or good earth for the word? What use has he made of the talents he has received? Jesus and the presence of the kingdom in this world are secretly at the heart of the parables. One must enter the kingdom, that is, become a disciple of Christ, in order to ‘know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven’. For those who stay ‘outside’, everything remains enigmatic.”¹⁴

The Kingdom of God is God's rule among people. It requires a complete reorientation of human relationship and an ordering of human society according to God's mind. The values which, in accordance with God's Kingdom, must characterize human relationships, can be summed up in a few words: freedom, brotherhood, peace, justice. The Kingdom aims at transforming relationship; it grows gradually as slowly people learn to love, forgive and serve one another.¹⁵ Accordingly, throughout his missionary action, Jesus denounces whatever in the society of his time offends against those values. This sets him in opposition to various categories of his own people: he chastises the oppressive legalism of the scribes, the exploitation of people by the priestly caste, the arrogant self-righteousness of the pharisees (Mt 23:1-36). Jesus is not a conformist, but a subversive on behalf of the rule of God. He refuses to abide by the stereotyped unjust structures of the society in which he lives. He associates preferentially with sinners and tax-collectors; he converses with a prostitute and welcomes Gentiles (Mk 7:24-30); he eats with a great thief Zaccheus, and accepts in his company a greedy man who later betrayed him, Judas Iscariot. Everyone is called to enter the Kingdom. First announced to the Children of Israel, this messianic Kingdom is intended to accept men of all nations (Mt 8:11; 10:5-7; 28:19). To all of them he announces that the Kingdom of God has come about; he invites them all to enter into it through conversion and an ordering of their life. To those who are scandalized he cries out: “People who are well do not need a doctor, but

¹⁴ CCC, n. 546.

¹⁵ See RM 15.

only those who are sick. I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts" (Mk 2:17). Jesus shows them in word and deed his Father's boundless mercy for them and the vast "joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Lk 15:7). The supreme proof of his love and the final coming of God's Kingdom will be the sacrifice of his own life.¹⁶ Jesus did look upon his impending death as the culminating point of his mission, of which he explained the salvific meaning to his disciples at the last supper. He offers himself "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28).

4. THE ADDRESSES OF THE KINGDOM

The Kingdom of God that is coming about through Jesus' life and action is predominantly addressed to the poor, the "*anavim*" of God, that is all the despised categories of people, the oppressed and the downtrodden.¹⁷ Biblical exegesis has shown that the poor to whom the Kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is preferentially destined are the economically poor, to whom despised, the oppressed and emarginated classes are assimilated – all those who suffer disability under the pressure of unjust structures.¹⁸

This is not to say that economic and social dehumanizing poverty constitutes for Jesus an object of choice for its own sake. Jesus is on the side of the poor, not of poverty; conversely, what Jesus challenges is riches, not the rich. What counts for him is readiness to enter into the Kingdom by practice its values. The poor are those predisposed to it, who place their trust in God, not in themselves and among whom the values of the Kingdom are seen present and operative. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20). The Lucan form of the first beatitude clearly states that the God's kingdom is primarily destined to the poor. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount does not preach any such system of justice that signifies the consecration and legitimation of a social "status quo" that has as its starting point discrimination between people. He announces a fundamental equality: All are

¹⁶ RM 16; J. DUPUIS, "Evangelization and Kingdom Values," p. 9; G. LOHFINK, *The exegetical predicament*, 109.

¹⁷ See CCC, n. 544; A. MOSER, "Sin as Negation of the Kingdom," *Theology Digest* 30(1982), 28.

¹⁸ See J. DUPONT, *The Poor and Poverty in the Gospels and Acts* (Chicago, 1977), 25-52; P. HOLLENBACH, "Liberating Jesus for Social Involvement," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15(1985), 156.

worthy of love. All are neighbors to each person. All are children of the same Father and because of this all are brothers and sisters.¹⁹

From the above it should have become clear that Jesus' attitude to justice and poverty goes beyond the message of the Old Testament prophets on the subject. The prophets had spoken in favor of the poor and the oppressed and in defense of their rights. Their prophetic discourse was clearly indicative of God's mind on their behalf: God's predilection for the poor and divine wrath at the injustice inflicted upon them. Jesus, however, does not only manifest a preferential option for the poor; he is not merely "in their favor." He gives his life as a "ransom for many" for the many oppressed. He identifies with them personally and associates with them preferentially. He is not only for the poor; he belongs to and with them. In this belonging and association of Jesus with the poor, God's preferential love for them comes to a climax. Jesus' attitude is not only indicative of God's mind for the poor; it embodies God's commitment to and involvement with them.

5. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

Almost all exegetes and theologians are in agreement on this point: the center of Jesus' preaching and teaching is the Kingdom of God. The word *Kingdom* occurs 160 times in the entire New Testament, with 120 occurrences in the Synoptic Gospels. The word *Church* is used only twice. This fact led to Alfred Loisy's often quoted polemical comment: "Jesus preached the Kingdom of God and what came out was the Church."²⁰

The Church as the community of those who have been chosen to carry on the vision that Jesus conveyed must define itself in relation to the Kingdom which is meant for humankind and the whole creation.

The Kingdom of God is present in the Church "*in mysterio*", that is, the mystery is revealed and is hidden at the same time.²¹ The mystery of Christ will reach its fulfilment by the power of God that is present and acting in the Church. We can say that there is a dialectical identity between the Church

¹⁹ L. BOFF, *Jesus Christ Libertor*, 71.

²⁰ A. LOISY, *L'evangile et l'eglise* (Paris, 1902). The formula *Kingdom of God* or *Kingdom of heaven* occurs over one hundred times in the gospels in the following distribution: Matthew 55 times, Mark 14 times, Luke 39 times. On the lips of Jesus we find the phrase 90 times.

²¹ Cf. CCC, n. 763. See A. NOWICKI, *Kościół w horyzoncie Królestwa Bożego. Studium eklezjologiczno-biblijne* (Wrocław, 1995).

and the Kingdom. The Church is the historical anticipation or the historical concretization of God's ultimate plan with humankind and creation as a whole. She is the "already of the not yet," meant to be the concrete realization of God's Kingdom now and sent for the witnessing of the Kingdom present and the proclamation of it to all nations and the whole world.

The Church is not identified with the Kingdom of God. Although the Kingdom cannot be identified with the Church that does not mean that the Kingdom is not present in her. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom of God in the eschatological phase of sacred history which began with Christ, the phase which brings about the Kingdom of God. Her mission is to serve the Kingdom and not to take its place. Vatican II states clearly: "the Church, equipped with the gifts of its Founder and faithfully guarding His precepts of charity, humility and self-sacrifice, receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While it slowly grows, the Church strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its King."²²

We must, however, constantly realize that the nature and mission of the Church is always to be understood in relationship and subordination to the Kingdom of God. The Church owes its existence to the Kingdom of God and both conceptions belong closely together, so that it is hardly possible to reach a clear understanding of the nature of the Church without relating it to the basic New Testament conception of the Kingdom of God.

Then, the mission of the Church is to serve the Kingdom and not to take its place. Vatican II states clearly: "While helping the world and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: That God's Kingdom may come, and that salvation of the whole human race may come to pass."²³ This text replaces what was perhaps the most serious pre-Vatican II ecclesiological misunderstanding; namely, the identification of the Church with the Kingdom of God on earth. This misconception accounts in many ways for the kind of ecclesial triumphalism that regards the Church as beyond all need for institutional reform and conceives her mission as bringing everyone within her fold in order to assure salvation.

²² LG 5; J. KUDASIEWICZ, "Królestwo Boże. Królestwo Boże a Kościół," in: *Encyklopedia Katolicka*, vol. 9 (Lublin, 2002), 1343.

²³ GS 45; cf. LG 5.

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After the resurrection we do find a shift in the preaching of the Kingdom of God. As Rudolf Bultmann expresses it: "He who formally had been the bearer of the message was drawn into it and became its essential content. The proclaimer became the proclaimed."²⁴ Though the shift is real, it is not an early falsification of the message. Consequently, it should not be overstressed. In Paul and other New Testament writings the Kingdom notion does not disappear nor is it replaced by other concepts. Although the word itself does not remain in center position as it did in Jesus' message, the idea nevertheless reappears constantly anew in a number of texts taking on its own shade of meaning. The Kingdom of God remained an element of the early Church's proclamation. To postulate that there are two central topics in the New Testament, the *Kingdom of God* before Easter and *Jesu the Christ* after Easter, has some legitimacy; but, both phrases are so intrinsically interwoven that they should not be contrasted one against the other.

Jesus of Nazareth, the fulfillment of God's plan, had as his mission the proclamation and establishment of the Kingdom. His entire mission is centered on the Kingdom of God, that is, on God as God is establishing God's rule on earth in God's messenger. Centered on the Kingdom of God, Jesus is by that very fact centered on the God. The God whom Jesus calls Father is at the center of this message, of his life and of his person. Jesus did not primarily speak about himself. He came to announce God and the God's Kingdom, and to be at God's service. God is at the center, not the messenger. Jesus presents himself as a "rabbi", but his teaching arouses astonishment, for he teaches with a singular authority, not like the scribes who merely interpret the law (Mk 1:22).

How is the Kingdom of God connected with the person of Jesus? The Kingdom is not a thing, not just a gift from God to his creatures; it is ultimately God's self-communication to us in love. Its meaning has been made visible in sacramental form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It is incomprehensible and compassionate love of God who did not spare his only Son but gave him up for our sake so that we may have life and have it in abundance (Rm 8:32; J 10:10). Through his words, his actions, and his own person, Jesus gradually reveals the characteristics and demands of the Kingdom. Jesus is the Kingdom in person; the "Good News" is Christ. The Kingdom

²⁴ R. BULTMANN, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. I (New York, 1951), 21.

of God is not only the central theme of Jesus' preaching, the reference point of most of his parables and the subject of a large number of his sayings, it is also the content of his symbolic actions.

The Kingdom of God already present in the world demands that all reality be restructured now according to the principles of the Kingdom. Human history must be taken seriously since it is this our world, the way we have made it, that will be transformed. With this conviction comes a particular spirituality. My being a Christian is a call to participate actively in this transformation of creation. It is not only a question of saving my soul. The Kingdom is a power that is constantly breaking into this world in order to transform it. This old, sin-permeated, corrupt world must be challenged by this message of the presence of the Kingdom in order for it to be transformed through the power and 'dynamism' of its final destiny: the Kingdom of God in its fullness.

The earthly and historical ministry of Jesus as the sacrament of God's reign present in history rectifies and de-mystifies all superficial presentations of the inner nature of the Kingdom of God as the goal of history. In him the Kingdom manifested itself to a degree never yet seen. Jesus' life-style in history demonstrated in a sacramental way, in an anticipatory way, the fullness of the Kingdom. Since his coming the Kingdom becomes an initial possibility for all through faith in him. Through commitment to Jesus it is possible to make the Kingdom present as he did, through activity and life. Only that commitment to act and to live as he did will clarify for us who he is and who acted through him.

Kingdom consciousness means living and working in the firm hope of the final triumph of God's reign. In the face of contrary evidence Kingdom Christians hold on to the conviction that God will eventually swallow up all evil, hate, injustice. It is the firm belief that the leaven of the Kingdom is already at work in the dough of creation, to use Jesus' own parable. This gives Christians an unworldly audacious confidence that enables them to go right on doing what others say is impossible or futile.

Understanding God's Kingdom means that the line between 'sacred' and 'secular' does not exist in concrete reality. God's Kingdom means that all things are in the sphere of God's sovereignty, and therefore, of God's concern. All spheres of life are Kingdom topics. Kingdom awareness means that ministry is much broader than Church work. Christians who understand the meaning of God's reign know they are in the Kingdom business, not the Church business. They see all activity as ultimately having Kingdom significance.

In Kingdom perspective, concern of justice and concrete commitment to the Word of God are necessarily held together. An awareness of God's Kingdom, biblically understood, resolves the tension between the two vital concerns. Those committed to the Kingdom want to win people to personal faith in Jesus Christ, since the Kingdom is the ultimate longing of every human heart. They are also committed to peace, justice, and righteousness at every level of society because the Kingdom includes "all things in heaven and on earth" (Ep 1,10) and the welfare of every person and everything God has made.

The distinction between the Kingdom and the Church bore immediate fruits in the development of post-conciliar theology, at least in two theological fields: in the theology of liberation²⁵ and in the theology of religions.²⁶ The symbol Kingdom of God provides the horizon for a solution for two theological problems.

First, in the context of liberation theology, correctly understood, it supplies the bridge that connects the historical liberation of the oppressed in this world with the eschatological Kingdom still to come in fullness at the end. It shows how work for justice and liberation inside and outside the Church is intrinsically linked with the Kingdom present now, since the ultimate goal of the Kingdom of God is the transformation of all reality.

Secondly, in the inter-religious dialogue the Kingdom furnishes the theologian with a broader perspective to enter into dialogue with other religious traditions. If the Kingdom is the ultimate goal of God's intentionality with all of humanity then, we can say, the question is not anymore how these other religious traditions are linked to the Church but rather how they reflect a ray of the Truth.

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²⁵ Cf. K. GÓZDŹ, "Ku rehabilitacji teologii wyzwolenia," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 62(2015), 2: 5-20.

²⁶ Cf. J. DUPUIS, "The Kingdom of God and World Religions," *Vidyajyoti* 51(1987), 530-544; *Evangelization and Kingdom Values*, 4-21.

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KRÓLESTWO BOŻE W PRZESŁANIU JEZUSA

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Pojęcie „Królestwo Boże” nie zostało odkryte przez Chrystusa czy Kościół pierwotny. Posiada ono głębokie korzenie w teologii i w historii Izraela. Nadejście Królestwa Bożego stanowi klucz do odczytania zbawczej misji Jezusa Chrystusa. Sam Chrystus nigdy nie zdefiniował rzeczywistości Królestwa Bożego. Rzeczywistość tę przybliżał słuchaczom poprzez przypowieści i obrazy. Najbardziej wyrazisty biblijny opis Królestwa Bożego znajdujemy w liście św. Pawła do Rzymian 14,17: „Bo królestwo Boże – to nie sprawa tego, co się je i pije, ale to sprawiedliwość, pokój i radość w Duchu Świętym”.

W Jezusie Chrystusie realizuje się odwieczne przymierze Boga z człowiekiem. Chrystus Pan jest wcielonym objawieniem Boga, który jest bogaty w miłosierdzie. Miłość Boża została nam dana w Jezusie przez Ducha Świętego. Chrystus, inaugurując Królestwo Boże na ziemi, zrealizował odwieczną wolę Boga Ojca. To Jezus Chrystus jest Królestwem Bożym i dlatego w Jego Osobie realizuje się w pełni istota Królestwa. Królestwo Boże stanowi poprzez miłość akt komunii Boga z człowiekiem.

Słowa kluczowe: Królestwo Boże; Jezus Chrystus; Kościół.