

## *First the Kingdom of God*

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### **I. The Kingdom of God and Jesus**

Whoever becomes involved with Jesus, becomes involved with the kingdom of God. This is unavoidably so, because the concern of Jesus--then and now--was and is the "kingdom of God." Whoever searches for God and asks about the kingdom wherein "righteousness and peace embrace (Ps. 85:11)" must look to Jesus and immerse themselves in his story--the narration of events that took place in the past but still occur today through his Spirit. This is self-evident and quite within our grasp, because the response to the question of who is Jesus is that he is none other than the kingdom of God in person. Jesus and the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God and Jesus, the two are inseparable. Jesus brings the kingdom of God to human beings in his own unique way and leads us to enter into its breathless expanse and beauty. And it is the kingdom of God that makes Jesus for us the Christ, the saviour and liberator. If, then, one wants to learn about the mysteries of the "kingdom of God", one must look to Jesus; and if one wants to understand who this Jesus is, one must first experience the kingdom of God.



I will continue to stress strongly the kingdom of God as Jesus-centered because in the political and religious history of the world there have been, and are today, radically different beliefs about what constitutes God's kingdom. Some absolutist, imperialistic, and despotic systems have and still do present themselves as "theocracies" in order to justify their crimes as acting "in God's name", and extol such crimes as blessed by heaven.

If there is a Christian difference in all of this, then it is Jesus who makes that difference, for it was in their name that he was crucified.

The will of the people to assume the power of self-determination has been steadily on the rise in Europe, intellectually since the Reformation 400 years ago and, then, politically two centuries later with the onset of the French Revolution. It has been essentially a movement against those theocratic despots who laid claim to power by "divine right", and it has resulted in the overthrow of these tyrants. "All men are created free and equal", and "All power is derived from the people." In such a world, the "kingdom of freedom" is not realized through religion but through revolution, and brings with it emancipation and autonomy. Those who understand this no longer wait for the arrival of a distant "kingdom of God." But is freedom already theirs; are they indeed truly free?

Where then is the kingdom of God to be found, this kingdom which is the particular concern of Jesus? On the side of theocracy or on the side of autonomy? In the camp of power or in the camp of freedom? To search for the answer to this question, I wish first to see how the kingdom reveals itself in the words and life of Jesus, in short, I want to "learn to see again", specifically through looking at four biblical passages wherein Jesus indicates his concern. Then, in order to reach for an answer, I wish by a series of questions and responses to "learn to discern and judge" what the kingdom of God is in itself. And, finally I want to offer a definite answer to the question raised, that I might know the direction in which I am to walk and be able to act with certainty along the way. In the third and closing section of this paper, I shall present certain perspectives of the kingdom of God that engage us in the here and now of our lives. For in every human circumstance there is only one thing necessary...in the family, in the economy, in culture, in nature, in politics or in the Church..."seek first the kingdom of God".

## **II. What is the Kingdom of God?**

How much damage is already done when the term chosen in translation evokes meanings the original text neither intends nor

implies. "*Basileia tou Theou*" reads the original Greek, but how is it to be translated? If one chooses "The kingdom of God" does this not evoke thoughts of empire, such as the Roman or German empires, or at least a Holy Empire? A "kingdom" is certainly a space shaped by law, ruled by a government and inhabited by citizens, both male and female, who are referred to as "members of the kingdom". If one's intention is to place limits on this space, we could confine it to the "kingdom of the good" or the "kingdom of evil", or again we could speak of the "spiritual kingdom" or the "secular kingdom". However, if the kingdom is related to God directly, then such dualisms cannot apply, for God is one and there is no other besides God.

For the past 100 years, the term "kingdom of God" has gradually been replaced by "the reign of God" or "where God reigns". This sounds more dynamic. God is Lord because God reigns; where God reigns, there is the kingdom. So far so good, however, we have suffered too much personally, professionally and politically from so many forms of domination where power is seized by rulers intent on reigning over us that we become cautious about the longing for "the reign of God". One wants to know beforehand what is the manner in which God reigns, and how it is to be compared to all other forms of authority; and, we also want to know if we shall have any say in things as God's obedient servants.

That God should be referred to as "Lord", might perhaps please the masculine members of the species, but what about the women who find this attribute less than reasonable and the implication of the "longing for domination" understandably having a limited attraction? If one adds weight to the term "the reign of God" by adding "royal" to the translation, as in "the royal reign of God", one will have to search a long time even, in confirmation classes, for a meaningful metaphor, and still manage to avoid becoming an item in the gossip columns of *Bunte* and *Stern*.

When we open the pages of the New Testament, we search in vain for any definition of the kingdom of God. Nowhere does Jesus explain the term. A new Church statement (*Votum der EKV*, 1986, 66) says that "Jesus presumed that it was already known what the term meant." While not unthinkable, the idea is incorrect. Jesus gave us no old or new notion of the kingdom of God. There is an important distinction here: It is

one thing to define righteousness, but quite another to live in the right way. To have a notion of happiness does not necessarily mean to be happy. And so it is one thing to define the kingdom of God and quite another to experience it, to feel it, to see it and to taste it. The notion may not determine the experience; it is rather the experience that determines the notion, otherwise difficulties in understanding the notion would make new experiences virtually impossible. In light of this let us set aside our notions of the concern of Jesus for the kingdom and turn directly to his concern itself. He presented his concern with such phrases as: "The kingdom of God is near; the kingdom of God is among you." What was the people's experience of him that led them to say: "That which we have heard, and have seen with our own eyes, and have watched and touched with our own hands: the Word, who is life...(1 Jn. 1)?"

We shall begin with the parables of the kingdom of God, because it is a speciality of Jesus to speak of the kingdom in parables drawn from the world of nature and the world of humanity. From his parables we gain a perspective of the kingdom which the terminology of explanation is not able to give. Our eyes are open through the richness of the parables to see the beauty and expanse of the divine kingdom. From parables we shall move on to cures, for Jesus' miracles of healing are, indeed, miracles of the kingdom. Then we shall address the table-fellowship of Jesus, which includes the outcast sinners and tax-collectors, for it speaks to "eating and drinking in the kingdom of God." And finally, we will explore the basic law of the kingdom, the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount.

It is always one thought which determines the conversations and relationships of Jesus: if God's kingdom is as near as Jesus is to the people, then the sick become healthy; the disenfranchised receive their rights; the unjust are brought to justice; then we must sit down and eat and drink because God's new day is dawning and the "festival without end" beginning.

### *1. The Kingdom of God in the Parables*

In the fourth chapter of Mark, we find a group of parables taken from the contacts of human beings with nature: the parable of the sower, of the seed and of the mustard seed. They are images of beginnings, life-processes, and of hope. The sower "goes out to sow his seed" blanketing the soil in confident hope

that it will take root, grow and bear fruit. So it is with the kingdom of God: the seeds of the kingdom are scattered throughout our lives to take root and grow there and bring forth much fruit. From small beginnings come great and wondrous effects when those beginnings are made by God. The seeds of the kingdom are like the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, that eventually grows to such proportions that it can offer a nesting place among its branches for all the birds under heaven.

The seed is self-actualizing. Its growth is independent of whether the world around it sleeps or wakes. It propels itself outward from its own inner power, generating stem, stalk, and kernel, until the whole field is ripe with wheat for the harvest. Carry the image back one step to its origin and the kingdom takes on another layer of meaning: the revitalization of nature itself. In Mark 13: 28-29 the "fig tree putting forth leaves" is the harbinger of the "summer which is nigh". Here nature itself becomes a parable of the kingdom. The greening of plant-life, the bursting of bud into flower, the seeds of the field sending forth shoots, all speak of the kingdom as the final springtime of creation...the emergence of new life that brings vitality and fruitfulness to all creatures. It is to be noted that nature parables are always taken from the seasons of spring and summer and never from the fall or winter. In nature's cycle of birth and death, growth and decay, only new life and becoming can serve as appropriate metaphors for the kingdom, for the kingdom of God is nothing other than a new creation, a new birth and growing of all things into eternal life.

The nature parables of the kingdom appeal to the senses. I smell the scent of a rose and inhale the sweet fragrance of the kingdom; I eat bread and drink wine and thus savor the rich flavours of the kingdom; I walk through a meadow in full bloom and sense the kingdom as a place of abundant growth where all human wants can be satisfied.

In Chapter 15 of Luke, we are given another set of parables. These have as their theme what is lost and found again. Here we find the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. We are told that "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine righteous" as an explanation of why the shepherd leaves his flock in search of the lost one and his happiness at finding him. In the second parable...a felicitous choice of the feminine here...a woman loses

and finds her lost coin. Her happiness is then compared to that of the "rejoicing among the angels of heaven over one repentant sinner". Finally, in the parable of the lost son, the father's joy at the return of his son is so great it can only be expressed in terms of death and life: "for my son was dead and has come back to life: he was lost and is found." Whenever the Gospel writers give us a short summary of the message of Jesus they repeatedly use the phrase: "The kingdom of God is near...repent".

The meaning of the word "repentance" has throughout the course of our own linguistic history changed so much that it is no longer a useful term when translating the original concern and intent of Jesus. These days it carries with it connotations of self-condemnation and recompense. Traditionally, the Hebrew term meant "a turning around", a turning away from a state of sin to enter a state of righteousness, a turning from injustice to embrace justice. But this term is closely allied to "conversion", a word which is laden with moralistic overtones. Here again we find our progress hampered by terminology and its explanations.

What is the point these parables are making? A sheep is lost and the shepherd rejoices that his search has not been in vain; a coin is lost but the coin itself can do nothing about its being lost or found again...the joy of discovery lies solely with the woman; the "lost and found" son was in the end neither lost nor found but rather "dead and come back to life". What meaning then do these parables convey about the kingdom of God? It is nothing short of the joy of God in the recovery of one of his creatures. And what of the "repentance" of the sinner? It is nothing other than the experience of "being found". A "coming home" from a land of alienation to "become alive again" in joyful harmony with God.

The kingdom of God is experienced when we, like the greening of springtime and the blossoming of flower and tree, "become alive again" to the presence within us of the inexhaustible love which generates new life. Where we experience the delight of God who rejoices over us and the awakening of our spirit to new life, there the kingdom of God is found to be not an alien domain but the well-spring of life itself. Here the kingdom is conceived of as vast space. A place where we can put down roots, develop and grow. It is a land without limits or boundaries. To experience the kingdom in this way is to redis-

cover the fullness of life's potential and the richness of its possibilities.

If the truth is that the kingdom of God is like "a treasure hidden in a field" and is to be compared with "a pearl of great price" (Mt. 13:44 ff) for the possession of which all is sacrificed, then what can there be of greater value or comparative beauty than the kingdom? And we need only turn to the parable of the great banquet (Mt 22:1-10) to understand clearly that the kingdom is not a military barracks where harsh disciplines are to be instilled, but a wedding hall where the laughter and the singing of the guests mingles with the joy of God.

### *The Kingdom of God in the Healings of the Sick*

With Jesus, words are not separate from actions, but both come together to form a single unit. The parables of the kingdom serve as commentaries on his healing of the sick, his association with those excluded ("sinners and tax collectors") from community, and his solidarity with the poor. And what happens in the interaction of Jesus with the sick, the outcast and the poor are authentic expressions of the presence of the kingdom of God. According to the Gospels, what people first experienced in approaching Jesus was the presence within him of the healing power of the Spirit. And according to those same Gospels, the people who drew near to him are not perceived as "sinners"...as we find them addressed in the letters of Paul...but rather as "sick in need of healing". From the dark nooks and shadowy corners where they have been forced to dwell, they come forth looking for Jesus, seeking the nearness of his presence.

"That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed of demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door" (Mk 1:32) Demons are personalized images of the forces of disorder and destruction. They take particular pleasure in tormenting their victims. According to an ancient Jewish hope, when the Messiah comes, these tormenting spirits will be banished from the earth forever and human beings will once again be able to lead healthy and reasonable lives. Miraculous healings of the sick were quite common in ancient times. They also continue to take place today in our world of scientific medicine. But the healings of Jesus stand in relationship to a special horizon: they belong to the coming of the kingdom of God. When the living God comes

to lay claim to his creation, then the forces of torment must give way and the health of their victims is restored. The kingdom of the living God uproots the germs of death and in their place sews the seeds of life. The kingdom not only brings healing in a religious sense but also the experience of physical well-being. The kingdom is realized in the healing of the sick. The Spirit brings life to those who are ill and under the sentence of death. While many of us today have no personal access to these Gospel stories of the physical healing of the sick by Jesus because we lack a comparable experience, we can come to understand with the help of these stories that God's life-force seeks to permeate our physical bodies as well. And in this we will be able to grasp the material side of the kingdom of God.

When God comes to renew and restore order in the world, then it should not seem peculiar but rather obvious that the sick become healthy and pathogens disappear. Christoph Blumhardt, who spoke from his own personal experience, called the healings of Jesus "kingdom miracles". In the morning splendor of the new creation, these events are not seen as "miraculous" but considered as something quite natural. When hope in the kingdom of God has been lost, however, the healing stories become forgettable fairy tales. But in the context of hope in the kingdom, the stories cannot be forgotten, for they then become the memories from which new hope springs.

Just as serious illness carries premonitions of death, so also must we understand the healings of Jesus as premonitions of the resurrection. Only when this mortal life is reborn into eternal life will what Jesus does for the sick be completed. In every serious illness we wrestle with death; and with every healing we experience something of the resurrection. We feel as if we have been reborn, and as "having been given life again". That is the way it will be with the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, although we cannot imagine it because we have not experienced it. In that resurrected world, the kingdom of God, which has been sown as seed in our hearts through the word of Jesus and in our mortal bodies through his healings, will be fully realized. With regard to illness, "kingdom of God" means "healing" with regard to death, "kingdom of God" means "resurrection".

When Jesus healed the sick, he was bringing the kingdom of God to others, making it his personal concern. But this is only



half of the truth. The other half is that when the sick came to Jesus, he in turn, experienced the coming to him of the kingdom of God. The healing power of God was not something given to him for his own personal disposal. In certain relationships healing did take place, but on other occasions nothing happened. Mark 6:5 tells us that when he returned home to Nazareth "he could do no mighty work". Under what conditions, then, was Jesus able to heal, and under what conditions was his healing rendered powerless?

Mark 9:23 recounts an incident when they brought an epileptic demoniac to Jesus and the father of the boy implored Jesus to heal him saying: "If you can do anything...help us!" Jesus retorts: "If you can do anything? All things are possible to him who believes." The boy's father answered in tears: "I do believe; help my unbelief!" Even this limited faith was enough, for Jesus took the boy "by the hand, lifted him, and the boy stood up."

The story of the woman with a haemorrhage (Mk 5:22) is even more striking. She slips stealthily through the crowd coming up behind Jesus to touch his cloak. "If I can touch even his clothes," she told herself, "I shall be well again." By touching him, she makes Jesus ritually impure according to the Law, but she does not hesitate to wrest from him his healing power for herself. Jesus perceives in himself that power has gone forth from him. He looks at her and says: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." Thus does Jesus experience his healing power as flowing from him without any conscious act of his will and he comes to know that this power heals by virtue of the faith of those who are sick. He thrives on the expectations of those who are brought to him to be healed and learns from them that the kingdom of God is also found in this atmosphere emanating from the reality of their lives.

And then there is the story of the Canaanite woman, who came up to Jesus pleading for help for her sick daughter (Mt 15:21). She is a gentile, not a Jew, and is bluntly dismissed by Jesus: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs." But she traps him in his own words: "Ah, yes, sir; but even the house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table." Jesus recognizes in her reply not only the greatness of her faith, but also the determination of her will. "Let your wish be granted" he says, and "from that moment her

daughter was well again." Here Jesus learns that the kingdom does not stop at the borders of Israel. It was a gentile woman who showed him the limitless extent of the new creation.

We can say then that the kingdom of God is what takes place in the interaction of Jesus with the sick, when his power meets their faith...the kingdom demands both. The presence of the kingdom is an experience of the Spirit. Our future is to experience in full the Spirit which is the kingdom of God. But we also experience the coming of that kingdom in the Spirit of God who is present to us now and gives life to all things.

### *The Kingdom of God in the Community of Jesus*

Just as Jesus promised the kingdom to the poor and just as he bestowed God's healing power upon the sick, so, too, did he bring the justice of God to those without rights and to those whom the Scriptures refer to as "sinners and tax collectors". Jesus demonstrated this publicly by entering into community with them. "This man accepts sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15:2), said the self-righteous with arrogance. From the horizon of the kingdom of God, which is "close at hand", Jesus anticipated through the table-fellowship the gathering of the just to eat and drink in the kingdom of God.

A "meal of the just" with the unjust at the same table? Yes, to express it in terms that Paul would use later, Jesus exercised God's right to bestow his grace upon the unjust and out of compassion "justified" them. This movement of grace is readily expressed in the word *acceptance*: "He accepted sinners". Those who have been excluded from and are refused entry into community suffer a deep wound to their self-esteem. When they are made to feel like "social rejects" and take this judgement of others to heart making it their own, they end up hating and despising themselves. Whoever finds people in such a situation and unconditionally accepts them, feels lifted up and redeemed. The acceptance of the despised and rejected is the healing which Jesus brings to "sinners and tax collectors". Thus does the kingdom of God invade the dark precincts of the humiliated and scorned to break down the psychological walls built there by feelings of self-contempt and worthlessness.

Wherever there are outcasts, like sinners and tax-collectors, there also are the self-righteous who make judgements on what is right and what is wrong, on who are to be included and who

are to be excluded. Those in possession of wealth define who are "the poor", and those who think they possess goodness determine who are the "evil ones" (Ragaz). When Jesus "accepts sinners and eats with them", he is regarded by the "just and the good" as either a sinner himself or a revolutionary bent on upsetting the order and values of their society. But in "justifying" sinners by the grace of God, Jesus is also offering the "just and the good" the possibility of salvation in rescuing them from the trap of their own self-righteousness. He who accepts the sinner is *a fortiori* also prepared to accept the "just" as well. Thus does the grace of God save the one and judge the other, but only to make it possible for both to come together in peace.

### *The Kingdom and the Poor*

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is the "constitution" of the kingdom of God in this world. It reaches its highest point in the Beatitudes of the Poor, for Matthew tells us "the kingdom of heaven is given to them" (Mt 5:3). What is called "the justification of sinners" in the writings of Paul and in the language of the Reformation is for Jesus the Beatitudes of the Poor. It is to "the poor" that the Gospel is first preached to those who have nothing and are counted as nothing in this world. "The poor" encompass the hungry, the enslaved, the unemployed, the disheartened, and those who weep and mourn. "The poor" are the oppressed: the *ochlos* in Greek, and the *minjung* in Korean. They are the people without social status--the "non-persons" of society; they are the faceless work-force--the human cogs in the machinery; and they are the "poorest of the poor" mostly old women of whom it is often said "are no longer good for anything".

On the other side stand not simply "the rich", but rather the "perpetrators of violence", who are responsible for making "the poor" poor, and who, having become rich at the expense of the poor, ignore them or expel them from their company. This social conflict within a violent society where the rich become richer and the poor even poorer is addressed by Jesus in both word and action. In this conflict, the Gospel takes a stand. Jesus sides with the poor, but he does so in order that the rich, too, may be saved and delivered from the consequences of their atrocious behavior.

What then does the Gospel bring to the poor? Neither wel-

fare-assistance programs nor material gain that they might join the ranks of the rich. What the Gospel brings to the poor is a radical *new dignity*. No longer are they the miserable objects of oppression and humiliation, but the privileged subjects of a new status as the first-born of the children of God. Jesus brings to them the certainty of a privileged place in the heart of God, a new dignity of indestructible value. And with this consciousness the poor, the enslaved, the men and women who are sold as so much chattel in the market places of this world are thus empowered to rise from the dust into which they have been ground and stand on their own. They are able to cast aside a social value system which would have them believe, with unrelieved insistence, that they indeed are failures, that because they "have not made it" in society, they are good for nothing. And with this new awareness of who they are, they can begin to live with heads held high as they move forward. The most difficult obstacle in the liberation of the poor has always been the appropriation of just such a social value system, which the "strong" in society impose upon the "weak", for it engenders in the human spirit a debilitating self-contempt. Faith overcomes self-hatred, and lifts up those whose backs have been bent under such a heavy burden. When Jesus says to the poor "the kingdom of heaven is yours", he is not offering them an empty consolation, nor is he admonishing them to wait in quiet patience for things to change; rather, he is authorizing them to stand erect and live, in the midst of this violent world, their own lives as the privileged children of the kingdom of God.

Jesus does not lead the poor to climb the ladder of social success, where they, too, might be counted among the upper-classes. He leads them along the path of authentic community where a *culture of sharing* is counted as the supreme value as demonstrated in the "feeding of the 5000".

Jesus and his disciples, both men and women, proclaimed the kingdom of God to the poor of their time because the kingdom already belongs to them. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5:3). Jesus *discovers* the kingdom amidst the poor, and it is the poor who reveal to Jesus the presence of the kingdom. The same is true of the little children about whom Jesus said: "...to such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:14). Jesus discovers that human beings must become like little children in order to enter the

kingdom of God. There is actually a silent invitation to enter the kingdom which proceeds from the poor. There is in all of this, then an understanding that a silent invitation to enter kingdom emanates from the poor; (it matters not if we call it "evangelism of the poor" or "the messiahship of the poor"). And the same invitation, simple and unspoken, comes to us also from the children. Jesus not only proclaimed the coming of the kingdom, but he also learned about it especially from the sick, from the poor, and from women and little children. Whoever hears of the kingdom today through the message of Jesus, will also rediscover the same kingdom in community with the sick, the poor and with women and children. This is because in the kingdom the last are the first and the weakest are the strongest. It is indeed good for us to know upon whom we can rely, and who it is that brings the kingdom nearer to us. They are the family of Jesus, his own people, because they represent and make present the kingdom of God to us in this most violent world.

### III. Five Theological Questions

In the light of the above biblical insights, we shall now try to answer some of the theological questions repeatedly raised about the kingdom of God.

#### *1. Is the kingdom of God a present or future reality; is it an object of experience or expectation?*

After what has already been said, this question poses little difficulty. In the community of Jesus, where the sick are made well, the lost are found, the despised gain acceptance and the old and weary find a new vitality, and where barren and empty lives suddenly blossom forth like a garden after spring rain, here can be found the beginnings of the kingdom of God. It starts as a seed buried in the earth, but soon shoots its sprouts upward into the open air where it can be readily observed and experienced. The kingdom is indeed also an object of hope, but a hope that is firmly grounded in experience and memory...the planted seed yearns to grow, the lost when they are found long to go home, the sick when healed look for the resurrection of

the dead, and the liberated prisoners seek the land of freedom. Precisely because the kingdom of God is experienced in the community of Jesus in the present, its future completion becomes an object of hope. Experience and hope reinforce one another.

The way in which the Church speaks of the coming kingdom in "signs" observable in the present, be they "the signs of the time" or "signs" to be found in the political order, seems somewhat limp and powerless. The seeds of the kingdom have already been planted, its shoots are now sprouting up, but its progress is not without growing pains. Those who feel the pains, which originate from the unredeemed condition of this world, experience anger and a sense of powerlessness. However, it is not from the *lack of* but rather *because of* the joyful experience of the kingdom of God that they are moved to cry out "*Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus" or pray "Thy kingdom come". The more we experience the nearness of the kingdom, the more urgently do we pray for its coming, for only when freedom is at the prison gate, do the chains of the prisoners chafe and cause pain.

## ***2. Is the kingdom of God to be of the earth, in this world, or in another world such as a kingdom of heaven?***

Those who would understand the kingdom as being in another world, always quote John's Gospel wherein Jesus says: "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). What they overlook is that this statement concerns the origin and not the location of the kingdom. Of course the kingdom is not "of this world" but comes rather from God, otherwise it would have no power to heal this world's ills. But in and through Jesus, the kingdom is certainly *in this world*, and it should be noted that when Jesus spoke these words, the kingdom of God was standing in his person before a governor of the Roman Empire.

If the kingdom is indeed a kingdom of the Creator-God, it must then encompass creation in all its entirety: heaven and earth, all that is visible and invisible. And if this be so, it must then embrace both this earthly world of ours as well as the world of heaven. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray for the coming of the kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven". By heaven we mean that part of creation which is already in accord with God, and by earth, that part of creation which is still in dispute. We

wait then in expectation of "a new heaven and a new earth" (2 Pt 3:13) for the future of the coming kingdom.

The expression "kingdom of heaven" is a Hebrew euphemism for the kingdom of God, for the Jews were forbidden to speak the sacred name. It has nothing to do with a wishful projection of an extra-terrestrial heavenly abode. We do not hope "to enter heaven", but hope instead for "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" (Nicaenum Art. 3). The kingdom of God, therefore, is as much of this earth as Jesus himself, and to look upon him in his final moments is to understand that the kingdom of God has been planted irrevocably in the soil of this earth with the cross of Christ. With the resurrection of the one who was crucified, comes "the new birth of creation". Therefore, brothers and sisters, remain faithful to this earth" because she is of inestimable value.

*3. Is the kingdom the preserve of God alone, or do human beings have a part in its building; are we merely to serve as bystanders, who can "do nothing" to accomplish this Messianic task?*

Church declarations like to state "The kingdom of God is God's affair," i.e. the business of God alone, so as then to conclude that "human beings cannot and need not be involved in its construction". (Magedeburter Erklarung, Oct. 1988). This amicable separation of God and humanity is understandable in light of the unfortunate modern alternative mentioned at the beginning of this article. But such a separation invalidates everything that the New Testament has to say about Jesus. Where do we place Jesus in this dichotomy? Was he truly God? Was he truly human? Or was he not the God-human, God become man? All the Christian confessions of faith indicate the latter. Therefore, it is not entirely truthful to say "the kingdom of God is God's affair" rather, the sentence should read: "The kingdom of God is the affair of Jesus."

We saw earlier that in the community of Jesus people experienced the kingdom in and through their very senses and physical experience of the kingdom, an experience that is neither provisional nor ambiguous but as definite and clear as that of a sick person who has been healed, a sinner who has gained acceptance, a lost one who has been found. As "the affair of Jesus", the kingdom of God can be readily experienced and can

also be readily practised in his community. "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Mt 6:33). The power of God is indeed experienced in the community of Jesus. And through this experience, human beings become "co-workers in the kingdom of God" called to perform the same Messianic works as Jesus himself. "As you go, preach this message: The kingdom of heaven is at hand." "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons" (Mt 10:7-8). It is the intent of Jesus here to make the kingdom of God our affair as well as his. God is freedom, and to possess authentic freedom means to walk and work in the kingdom.

"The work of God's kingdom"--this is what the missionary and diaconate services of Christians in the 19th century were rightfully called,--in Germany, e.g. Johann Hinrich Wichern's "Rauhes Haus" for wayward children in Hamburg, Gustav Werne's industrial cooperatives in Reutlinger, Bodelschwingh's diaconal institutions in Bethel, all represented "the work of the kingdom". But in lieu of the emphasis given by the modern world to the "Protestant work ethic", something more needs to be added. Alongside and in conjunction with the work of the kingdom is the *enjoyment* of the kingdom. This finds expression in the Sabbath rest and the celebrations of the Lord's Day. According to Jewish tradition, to celebrate the Sabbath is to possess "one sixtieth" of the kingdom of God, and every successful celebration of the Lord's Day counts for even more. "To work and pray" is good, but "to rest and celebrate" adds the note of completion.

#### ***4. Is the kingdom of God to be another world or this world in a different form?***

Some imagine the kingdom of God as another world following upon the end of this world, and eternal life as the "after-life", i.e. another life after this life. To think about the kingdom in such a way is erroneous and devalues God's creation. The "new creation" is not the creation of a new world but a new creation of our old and disordered one; "eternal life" does not mean the creation of another life but rather the resurrection of this life into the life of God. In the words of Paul: "This mortal nature must put on immortality (1 Cor 15:53). The kingdom of God means that this world becomes different when out of the injustice and violence of its present condition, a new



order of justice and peace is born. It means that delivered from godlessness we again become the people of God and children of the Spirit. It also means that the kingdom of God cannot be limited to the religious sphere alone, or confine itself only to the spiritual or moral aspects of life. As the kingdom of the Creator-God, it must be universal and all embracing, as rich in variety and diversity, in colour and splendour as creation itself. In reading the gospels whenever the phrase "the kingdom of God" appears, it would be helpful to retranslate it as "the new creation", as for example: "Come alive! the new creation is at hand!"

Even though our experience of the kingdom may be only that of seed and sprout: a gentle awakening to the morning sun, a minor healing of incidental pain, we have no right to place any limits on the "new creation", certainly not to exclude it from such areas of life as politics or the economy. Everywhere that life is threatened, the living God becomes involved.

##### ***5. Is the kingdom of God a theocracy or a communion?***

The literal translation of kingdom of God indicates a theocracy, but the "concern of Jesus" places emphasis on the revitalization of all creatures in the community of the Creator-God. The kingdom is God's space...space without limit, free of constriction and pressure, and there can be no human freedom outside it. The kingdom is God's time...time fulfilled, where the moment of lingering beauty does not pass away, but stays to linger on in the now of eternity. The kingdom is God's rest...to live in the kingdom is to dwell in his creation as it becomes the house of the Lord. The kingdom of God is the nearness of God, the presence of God, a sharing of all God's creatures in the attributes of God...in his beauty and glory, his vitality and goodness, and all of this because God also shares in the attributes of his creatures who are the work of his hand...their finiteness, their vulnerability and their mortality. The kingdom of God is the experience of a communion of love, here and present to us now, for "whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in them." (1 Jn 4:6).

Such is our expectation and for such we await: all of creation redeemed in God and the object of his unbounded joy. I call this way of understanding creation a Christian conception: of the kingdom of God. If the kingdom of God is the person of

Christ, what then is the kingdom of God if it is not the incarnation of God in the cosmos of all creation. Without this Christian conception of the kingdom, which we find in Jesus, a concept of the kingdom as a theocracy has limited meaning and is also open to clerical and political abuse.

#### IV. "First the Kingdom of God"

"Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Mt 6:33)

For Jesus, the kingdom of God placed first on his agenda; for us, however, other items constantly vie for our attention, most of them related to the pursuit of self-interest. We must seek then to place a concern for the kingdom once again at the forefront of our lives.

Here I shall resurrect from the past the old concept of the different forms the kingdom of God takes in our world. But in reviewing these forms, I hope to relieve them of their static quality, which would have them represent some unchangeable order of things, by spelling out in more concrete terms what we must strive to attain in these areas in light of the now and future kingdom. I will speak of the following:

1. the humanization of human relationships;
2. the democratization of politics;
3. the socialization of the economy;
4. the naturalization of culture;
5. the Church's orientation to the kingdom of God.

1. *The Humanization of Human Relationships*: the most intimate *loci* in which human beings become humanized are to be found in the relationships of marriage, family and friendship. Because cruelty in any form is inhuman and causes direct harm to our relationships, be they between men and women, parents and their children, or friend and friend, our task here consists in striving to become truly human to each other, dealing with each other in a Christian way.

Loving is an art that must be learned. We learn it through the forgiveness that dissipates guilt, which we experience in the amazing miracle of the new beginning. In that "space without limit, free of constraints and pressure", we learn to accept each

other lovingly that we might grow in unison and develop together. Love is a friendship that knows how to blend affection with respect for the freedom of the other. This respect is for the mystery of the other and his or her possibilities. When love ceases, our images of each other harden and become rigid. We sit in judgement of each other and hold each other hostage...this is death. But love liberates us from such images and holds the future open for the other; we have hope in each other's future and, therefore, we learn to wait for each other...this is life.

Human relationships extend far beyond marriage and the family. They are the foundation on which every society is built. Here the "concern of Jesus" for the poor and the rejected-outcast also hold true for society as well. A society is only as good as the well-being of its weakest members. The right to be treated with compassion is not just the rule of *caritas* and *diakonia*, it is a right that must also be written into the constitution of every society which claims to be human. Social legislation and organized health care are to be measured and weighed in the balance of the burden of the poor and the distress of the sick. One way of perceiving the humaneness of a society is to look into its prisons and see the conditions there. For to see with the eyes of the crucified Christ, one must look at society not from above but from below.

2. *The Democratization of Politics*: this is a programme which originates from the human and civil rights of all citizens and organizes the institutions of the state to serve the people...not the people to serve the state. The power of the state and the exercise of this power can only be legitimated by an appeal to human dignity and human rights. This holds true not only for domestic policy, but also for foreign policy. It is human rights that set the limits of state power and its exercise, and for the state to step beyond them is to close all claims to govern legitimately. In this context, the Theological Declaration of Barman said, (Thesis 5): "The Church reminds us of the kingdom of God, God's commandments, and God's justice, and in so doing reminds us also of the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled." This reminder of the kingdom of God also prohibits, in my opinion, the "deterrence" of potential enemies with the threat of world destruction through the use of ABC weapons. However, again in my opinion, it also mandates

"interference in the internal affairs of other states" when human rights are trodden under foot.

3. *The Socialization of the Economy*: this does not mean expropriation or nationalization by the state, but rather the just distribution of labour and profit among all members of society, including both the present and future generations. All societies operate through written social contracts, but there is also an unwritten contract that exists between generations. What has to be addressed today is the just distribution of work and life opportunities for the cross-section of society and also the just distribution of work and life opportunities vertically to include our children and future generations. Our children are the weakest members of society. They and future generations yet unborn have no say in the decisions we make now in the present. Why should they then be forced to pay the bill for this generation's expenditures? This contradicts the justice of the kingdom of God.

4. *The Naturalization of Culture*: this is also called ecological reform: and is of paramount importance today. Culture has been directed to subdue nature and make it subject to human use. The future culture of humankind will have to integrate itself into the cosmos and bring itself into harmony with the natural condition of the earth in which we live. We will have to learn to respect the rights of creation and of all the other creatures of this earth, if humanity is to survive. The natural environment must be protected from the destructive grasping tendencies of human beings, and this for the sake of humanity itself. Though it may sound paradoxical, it still remains true that only when human beings no longer stand in the centre of culture will humankind have a chance to survive. Human beings are neither creation's crown, nor the reason why creation was made. The human being is one creature in the great community of creation, created to praise God in union with the heavens which praise the eternal glory.

5. *The orientation of the Church to the kingdom of God*: an outgoing orientation to the kingdom of God must replace the introverted version commonly found in today's Church. The Church does not exist for its own sake. It is not to become

preoccupied with its own concerns, but rather give full attention to "the concern of Jesus". There is no justification for pursuing inherent interests, such as maintaining its status or extending its influence, unless these are subordinated to the interests of the kingdom. If its spirit and institutions are in accord with the kingdom of God, it is indeed the Church of Christ. But should they run counter to it, the Church then loses its right to exist and it will be counted as superfluous, a religious community chasing after its own illusions.

In today's world, kingdom orientation means advancing evangelization and liberation. The divine mission of the Church consists in proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom to all peoples, first and foremost to the poor, in order to awaken a faith that assures and elevates. At the same time it is also the divine mission of the Church to bring freedom to the oppressed, to restore human dignity to the scorned and humiliated, and rights to those who have been deprived of them. Evangelization and liberation complement each other in much the same way as the healing of downcast spirits complements the healing of diseased bodies. It is the message of the Basic Christian Communities and other congregations throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America that evangelization and liberation go hand in hand. The mission mandate of Christ and the revolutionary imperative; the call to repentance and establishment of a just society through economic and political reforms; achieving peace with God, and establishing world peace among the nations are inseparable and belong together. Where the kingdom of God is near at hand, the people of God are gathered together. There God proclaims the message of his kingdom, and leads the world into the saving assembly. The Church is an evangelizing and liberating community, or it is no Church of Christ's and no Church at all.

I would like to close this article by making to you, my readers, to the people of the Church and all peoples a general appeal on behalf of the kingdom of God.

*First the Kingdom of God---then the Church:*

Bishops and Pastors (both men and women), all you administrators who, in your heavy tomes and extensive surveys, pose the question with anxious hearts: "What will become of the Church?": forget the Church and think about the kingdom. Seek its justice and a living Church shall be yours as well.

Forget about "being Christian" and think about "the new creation of all things", for the latter already includes being a Christian.

*First the Kingdom of God---then the State:*

Politicians and Citizens (both women and men), you who worry over the security of the state and are frightened by its power. Forget about the state and its power and think about the kingdom of God and its justice, and then you will know the limits of state power and how best to use it in serving the rights of nature and of human beings.

*First the Kingdom of God---then the economy:*

Entrepreneurs, Trade-unionists, Manufacturers and Consumers, all you who work for and worry about the growth of the Gross National Product. Forget about the profit and its growth and think about the kingdom and its justice...justice for the poor, justice for the peoples of the Third World who live in the shadows of the First, justice for the future generations for whom we work and justice for nature from which we live. Think about the long-term and not the short-term development, and a much more "lasting development" will be yours as well.

*First the Kingdom of God---then the self:*

Those who lose themselves for the sake of the kingdom will find themselves. And those who from pride or self-pity hold fast to themselves will in the end lose themselves. Do not draw back, then, but get involved! This is not done without pain, but those who find the kingdom will find also their true selves, for the kingdom of God is also to be found deep "within us."

Become a participant in the kingdom of God today, and let something of "the rebirth of all things" begin to take form and shape in your world, a work which Christ himself will bring to completion in the day of his coming. Come alive! For your life comes now with the kingdom of God, and there it shall bud forth and blossom and bear much fruit.