

Life of the Spirit

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THE KING AND THE KINGDOM

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GRACE and peace . . . from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of earth. To him who loves us and has loosed us from our sins in his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests to God and his Father—to him be the glory and the might for ever and ever: amen! (Apoc. 1, 4-6.) This text from the last book of the Scriptures serves to recall a large and important aspect of the apostolic witness to the doctrine of the King and his Kingdom. The Apocalypse is full of the Kingdom in all its phases: as it now is, even now triumphant, and yet to be perfected, consummated in a hereafter. It is a sustained vision of Jesus Christ glorified as also of the Bride of Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, glorified.

To the several visions of St John let us add the witness of Philip who went about 'preaching the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 8, 12). St Paul, too, is an apostolic witness, as when at Ephesus 'for three months he spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading about the Kingdom of God' (Acts 19, 8), or again in the words of the poignant farewell at Miletus, 'you know after what manner I have lived among you . . . and now you shall see my face no longer, all you among whom I went about preaching the kingdom . . .' (Acts, 20, 20, 25), and then again to his last days 'bearing witness to the Kingdom of God, and trying from morning to evening to convince them concerning Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets' (Acts 28, 23; cf. 28, 31).

Should you argue that this is really St Luke talking in Acts, still it could be shown that he was faithfully representing St Paul's teaching on this matter. For he whose

whole life and love was the preaching of Christ crucified, preached too of that Kingdom that came to be with the consummation of that loving sacrifice of Calvary. The Epistles tell of a loving God 'who has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Col. 1, 13). The faithful are called from darkness into the light of that kingdom because 'God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts' (2 Cor. 4, 6), and are bidden 'walk then as children of light' (Ephes. 5, 8) in a kingdom which is at once both a society into which we enter and fidelity to a teaching or doctrine not of this world. (Cf. 1 Cor. 4, 20; 6, 9, 10; 15, 50; Gal. 5, 21; Ephes. 5, 5, etc.)

Further witness comes from the Epistle to the Hebrews which teaches that believers receive from the hand of God 'a kingdom which cannot be shaken' (Heb. 12, 28). St James speaks of the 'heirs of the kingdom, promised by God to those who love him' (James 2, 5); and we read too of 'the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1, 11).

All these texts taken together, forming what we have termed the apostolic witness, bear out the teaching of the King himself, show that his doctrine lived on in the Church then as it ever lives on with undying life. It was what he taught from the outset, when he began to do and to teach and at his baptism took over the message of that kingdom seemingly in the very words of St John Baptist. It was what he taught at the term of his course on earth 'when he showed himself alive after his passion by many proofs, during forty days appearing to them and speaking of the Kingdom of God' (Acts 1, 33).

It was new teaching for the contemporaries of our Lord, yet at the same time familiar and reminiscent of a whole tradition of synagogal teaching, conjuring up a great element in the messianic hopes of Israel. Verbally the notion conveyed was rather more abstract. More often we should render the biblical phrases by 'dominion' or 'kingly rule' rather than 'kingdom'. The rabbinic writings give both 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of the heavens'. From there it is an easy step to the language of the New Testament,

where we read *basileia tou Theou* (sixty-three times) and *basileia tôn ouranôn* (thirty-two times, in St Matthew only). The two phrases are identical in meaning. It is perhaps impossible to decide whether our Lord himself spoke of the 'Kingdom of God' or of the 'Kingdom of the heavens'. It may be that St Matthew's formula preserves the original phrase. But he wrote for judaeo-Christians who would anyway have tended to avoid the revered name of Jahweh; and it may be that our Lord used both expressions.

Let us leave words and phrases, and sketch out very briefly the long pre-history of the notion of King and Kingdom. Kingship more often supposes some sort of territorial domain: yet not so necessarily when talking of God. The lordship or domain of God in the Old Testament has three main aspects: (i) dominion over Israel; (ii) over the world, heaven and earth in a very wide sense; and (iii) dominion over the elect. The idea of calling God a 'king' in Israel was born of historical experience. From the earliest times the Chosen People were conscious of fighting under God's orders, of wending their way under God's leadership and shepherding: theocracy was rooted in that nation.

'... thou shalt bring them [the Chosen People] in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in thy most firm habitation, which thou hast made, O Lord; thy sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established. The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.' (Exod. 15, 17-18.) Such a passage brings out well the close union between Israel and God, and that kingship which is everlasting. To it we might add the second half of Isaiah, 'I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King' (Is. 43, 15). And because God is Redeemer as well as King, the Kingdom is depicted as future: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings . . . that preacheth salvation, that sayeth to Sion, thy God shall reign' (Is. 52, 7). Such words heralding the Gospel, as all this part of Isaiah, have earned for the book the title of 'fifth gospel', telling of our Lord and his Kingdom.

'The Lord has reigned, let the earth rejoice, let many islands be glad' (Ps. 96, 1), might serve to sum up the spirit of the Psalms, more especially the 'royal' psalms and

the messianic (the themes are frequently interwoven) which tell of the reign of God and foretell the reign of his Christ. The Psalms can be classified according as they sing of a past or present or future reign of God. More often, they tell of a future; David awaits Christ.

Something of a new conception appears in the vision of Isaiah: 'I saw the Lord sitting upon his throne, high and elevated. . . . Holy Holy, Holy, . . . all the earth is full of his glory' (Is. 6, 1). There is a note of universality. When we come to Daniel, this is doubly apparent, and the mental horizon of the Jews is enlarged beyond all measure. What a change had come upon them, when one of their number could write: 'I Nabuchodonosor do now praise and glorify and magnify the King of heaven because all his works are true' (Dan. 4, 34), and 'verily your God is the God of gods and Lord of kings' (Dan. 11, 47). God's transcendent rule is recognised by a Babylonian. The later Psalms contain parallel notions, as do the books of Esther, Tobias, Maccabees. 'Thou art great, O Lord, for ever, and thy kingdom is to all ages' (Tobias 13, 1).

The third main aspect of the kingdom in the Old Testament is of God as King of all the elect, of those just ones who, after death, will live and reign with God. An eschatological idea, familiar to traditional Christian, but in no Hebrew book of the Old Testament. Only in Wisdom is it explicit: 'the just shall be mine and shall run to and fro like sparks among the reeds; they shall judge over nations, rule over peoples, and their Lord shall reign for ever' . . . 'they shall receive a kingdom of glory and a crown of beauty', for 'incorruption bringeth near to God' (Wisdom 3, 7-8; 5, 16-17; 6, 20).

With all this, and more, in the minds of those who heard him, we can understand better why our Lord made so much use of the phrase 'kingdom of God' or 'Kingdom of heaven'. It was generally understood in some sense; it was admirably adaptable, a 'portmanteau' phrase rich in suggestion, and at the same time sufficiently indeterminate. It could be, and was, given new and forceful connotations. Note that our Lord never defined '*Malcuth shamayim*'. The disciples were to make their own definition, gradually, as

they grew aware of the wondrous unfolding of God's designs. And we are to do likewise.

Now let us see various aspects of the Kingdom—as we can glean them from the very words of the King himself.

First, in terms of time, the Kingdom as a very present reality that has come and *is*. Thus 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 4, 17). John the Baptist is the last of a long tradition of Law and Prophets. The old order gives way to a new: after him is the reign of the Kingdom (cf. Luke 16, 16). The Kingdom is inaugurated because devils are expelled, 'if I, by the Spirit of God, cast out devils, then is the Kingdom of God come upon you' (Matt. 12, 28). So, too, the Kingdom is a *present* possession of some who have advanced far in the grace of God, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . the persecuted, because theirs is the Kingdom' (Matt. 5, 3; 10). Yet it is already a present possession of all who have been baptised. Baptism indeed brings about an entry into that Kingdom, 'unless a man be born of water and spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God' (John 3, 5). And there yet remains a sense in which it is received now by spiritual childhood, for we are to 'receive the Kingdom of God like a little child' (Mark 10, 15).

Next we consider the Kingdom in process of coming-to-be. This is perhaps best known to us because we pray 'thy kingdom come', and because we know full well that there must be more prayer, toil, suffering on our part before the kingdom is in any sense established in the world as in our own hearts. This coming, and yet-to-come aspect of the kingdom, is the prolongation of a theme that can be traced through the prophets of the Old Testament. And now with our Lord as Priest, Prophet and King, there is truly a new beginning, a further definitive stage in the unfolding of God's plans. The kingdom in its truest sense begins with our Lord. He alone is truly King: *Tu Solus Dominus*, and his life-work is the promotion of that kingdom. And for that promotion there must be ceaseless preaching of the word of God, or the 'Word of the Kingdom' (Matt. 13, 19), for the 'Gospel of the Kingdom must be preached throughout the world' (Matt. 24, 14). In this sense the Kingdom of God is a doctrine, new and mysterious, a teaching sown in the

hearts of men (Matt. 13, 37). The Christian teacher is taught about this (Matt. 13, 32) while the preacher spreads the good news or gospel. The fullest expression of that teaching is in the Sermon on the Mount, which has been rightly termed the charter of the Kingdom. It is a great body of teachings, perhaps from several moments in our Lord's life. It is not complete (thus, there is nothing about faith . . .) but illustrative of the doctrinal aspect, presented with authority by our Lord: thus we find 'of old' . . . 'but I say unto you . . .'

From the kingdom as a doctrine we pass naturally to the sense of the kingdom as a society or the body of those who accept this teaching, and who recognise the King's authority behind that teaching. This assembly of believers is a sort of prolongation of Israel. The 'Hear, O Israel' is renewed for the New Israel of God. Jews should have been its natural members, yet they will be excluded: 'the Kingdom of God shall be taken from you and shall be given to a nation that yields the fruit thereof' (Matt. 21, 43). The disciples 'await the kingdom' in his company, following his doctrine (Luke 23, 51; Matt. 15, 43). Pharisees are condemned for closing it to others, not entering themselves (Matt. 23, 13), and yet all are convened to enter (Luke 14, 16-24). Heroic effort, violence may be called for (Matt. 11, 2); and the call is constantly repeated, even to the eleventh hour (Matt. 20, 1-16). In this society, we are bidden seek first the kingdom of God (Luke 12, 31), which is a precious pearl, a treasure (Matt. 13, 44-46), and calls from us supreme sacrifices (Luke 18, 29).

God's help is assured in furthering the kingdom. Indeed he gives all. 'Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased the heavenly Father to give you the Kingdom' (Luke 12, 32). Faith and understanding are gifts of God: 'to you it is given to know' (Matt. 13, 11). So much is given—because the King himself has taught that 'it is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20, 35). Yet all God's giving supposes the co-operation of man in furthering the Kingdom. Not the man who says 'yes', but he who acts (Matt. 21, 28-32). And there is no bargaining with God (Matt 20, 10); 'even so when you have done all things commanded you, say

we are useless servants; we have not done what we were bound to do' (Luke 17, 10). And, anyway, the Kingdom will grow as it were necessarily as seed sown in the ground. But the kingdom is in part human, there are some members to be eliminated 'at the last day' (Matt. 13, 24-50).

This 'last day' brings us to another facet of the kingdom: the kingdom as fully realised in the final consummation, in the Messianic kingdom. 'I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mark 14, 25); and 'Blessed is he that shall feast in the kingdom of God' (Luke 14, 15). This 'last day' is also that of eternal retributions, of heaven or gehenna (Mark 9, 47; Luke 13, 25-30). It is especially at the end of St Matthew's gospel that we are given a synthesis of our Lord's saying about 'the last things', the kingdom in its consummation. Thus we are told of the end of the world and the triumph of Jesus Christ (24, 1-44); of the end of individual disciples and their relation to the work of the Redeemer (24, 15-25, 30); and finally, the end of the world, when God will be all in all (25, 31-46). 'But when the Son of Man comes in glory and all the angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory, and all nations shall be gathered together before him. . . . Then shall the King say to those on his right, come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world. . . .'

Only here, in the Synoptic gospels, does our Lord assume the title of 'King'. But, when before Pilate, he declared 'Thou sayest it; I am King' (John 18, 37). And we know and believe that he is King of kings and Lord of lords, and of his kingdom there shall be no end.