

God's Kingdom and his Judgement

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In an earlier issue of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*¹ I said: 'The kingdom of God is here, these are the last days and, therefore, this is the time of heaven; we await the completion of the kingdom of God only in the sense that for a little while the effects of this situation are suspended'. I think that the idea of the kingdom of God is neglected in popular Catholic instruction and thinking, and that if we are to understand the community of God properly then we must try to understand what is meant by the idea of the presence in the world of the kingdom of God. The difficulty facing most people when they approach this question seems to be engendered by a mistaken understanding of that ambiguous term 'the four last things'. The phrase has too great a history in Catholic thinking to be abandoned, but we must see what is meant by it, or rather, we must see how it is applied. We tend to use the word 'last' in the same sense that we say 'I will put out the cat *last* thing at night': putting out the cat is a thing that I do at the end of my day, it is my *last* job before going to bed. Similarly we think of the four *last* things as being last in the same sense—as coming at the end of our lives, as belonging in time to a period in the indefinite future. We are fully aware that in the eucharist we are united to one another as to Christ, but we see that relationship in its present form as being the condition in which we must approach the 'last things'. What I want to show is that a right understanding of the idea of the kingdom of God will help us to see that it is mistaken to think of the 'last things' in this way.

It is, of course, true of all the structural factors in saving history that they are found in some form or other in the Old Testament. The notion of the kingdom of God has its beginning in the Old Israel. Christianity has transformed the idea but has not destroyed it and it is important for us to observe that it is present in the world of the Jews. The word 'kingdom' conjures up, for most of us, the image of a territory or community governed by a king. We are accustomed to thinking of the

¹March 1962.

king as being the representative or embodiment of the community as well as its ruler. The idea of God as king comes very early in Jewish religious thought; after the crossing of the Red Sea we find in the song of Moses, the concluding verse, 'The Lord will reign for ever and ever'. (Ex. 15. 18) Most important of all in considering the history of salvation is the idea expressed later in Exodus, 'and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. (Ex. 19. 6) Again, in the address made by Samuel to the people come the striking words, 'And when you saw that Nahash the king of the Ammonites came against you you said to me, "No, but a king shall reign over us," when the Lord your God was your king'. (1 Sam. 12. 12) Until Sinai, Israel was hardly the kind of community that led the settled existence that demanded a king; from Sinai until Israel finally abandoned its nomadic character their conception of government was at once tribal and theocratic. It was with its evolution into a settled community and with the appointing, first of the judges, and then of the charismatic kings, that Israel perfected the idea of the kingship of God, which was to mark the fulfilment of all things.

The future glory of Israel, the final victory of the kingdom of God, is a constant preoccupation of the Old Testament writers; for the purpose of this article the most important examples are to be found in the book of Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord God: 'I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out; I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar; and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord bring low the high tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it'.

Ezekiel 17. 22-24.

Israel is to be renewed and be made great again;

For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will pour my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and

be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses; and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good; and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

Thus says the Lord God: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now inhabited and fortified'. Then the nations that are left round about you shall know that I, the Lord, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do it.

Ezekiel 36. 24-36.

Israel is to be the summit of the world:

Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his multitude:

Whom are you like in your greatness?

Behold, I will liken you to a cedar in Lebanon,
with fair branches and forest shade,

and of great height,
its top among the clouds.

The waters nourished it,
the deep made it grow tall,
making its rivers flow,

round the place of its planting,
sending forth its streams
to all the trees of the forest.

So it towered high
above all the trees of the forest;
its boughs grew large
and its branches long,
from abundant water in its shoots.

All the birds of the air

made their nests in its boughs;
 under its branches all the beasts of the field
 brought forth their young;
 and under its shadow
 dwelt all great nations.

It was beautiful in its greatness,
 in the length of its branches;
 for its roots went down
 to abundant waters.

The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it
 nor the fir trees equal its boughs;
 the plane trees were as nothing
 compared with its branches;
 no tree in the garden of God
 was like it in beauty.

I made it beautiful
 in the mass of its branches,
 and all the trees of Eden envied it,
 that were in the garden of God.

Ezekiel 31. 2-9.

We find the same idea in the book of Daniel:

The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth; and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were fair and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the air dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

Daniel 4. 10-12.

The vision of the temple in Ezekiel, chapters 40-43, is shot through with hope for the future glory to which is allied all forms of messianism in the long history of Jewish theology. Everything was focussed on the idea of a bright future when the kingship of God should be universally recognized and his kingdom should be established. Each of these apocalyptic passages refers to the idea of a purified remnant of the dispersed community of God which shall be able to bring about the situation in which Israel is worthy for the Kingdom of God to be established in and through it. This element in Jewish thinking, which runs through the writing of all the later prophets, is to be seen clearly in the book of Haggai.

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take

pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord. You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land and the hills, upon the grain, the new wine, the oil, upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all their labours. Haggai 1. 7-11.

And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month. Haggai 1. 14-15.

Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of the kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his fellow. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts.

Haggai 2. 21-23.

Even a cursory acquaintance with the Old Testament and the teachings of Christianity will show that all the major ideas in the Old Testament find their place in the community of the new Israel. With the hindsight given us by the revelation of Christ we are able to see what part they play in the history of salvation, and how, by that same revelation, they are transformed into something far greater. The community of Israel after the covenant of Sinai was the community of God present to and in the world, and what was revealed through that community must, of necessity, be true. In the new Israel these ideas come to fruition in the final revelation before the transformation of the world. The idea of the kingdom of God was one of the key concepts of the Old Testament, and it has come to fruition in Christ in a special way.

With the fall the world was in part handed over to the powers of Satan; there was a real sense in which the devil could be called the king of creation and we tend to remark upon this without realizing how truly astonishing such a thing should be. That God could put it into the

power of man to so dispose by his sin the destiny of creation must be seen in relation to the truth that 'God so loved the world . . .' Men were still able to reject service of the devil, though clearly their power to do so was severely limited by their initial failure. God was faced, so to speak, with a creation which was turned away from him, and with a worldly community fragmented and without hope. With the calling of Abraham (Gen. 17. 1-8) and the beginning of the community of God's people, the work of redeeming the situation took on a new beginning. God's intervention in human history, and the fostering of the redeeming dialogue between himself and man until the coming of Christ, is a history of preparation for the situation in which the power of Satan could be broken and the kingdom of God restored. As far as it is valuable to look for over-all patterns at all in the scriptures there are two which immediately strike one; the first is the repeated falling away of Israel and its return as a purified remnant with a deepened understanding of revelation, and the second, which is related to the first, a continual growth both in love and knowledge of God. Frequently the falling away is connected with some dramatic change in the fortunes of Israel, as in the case of the Babylonian exile, at other times it seems to arise out of the internal decay in the life of the community. The Roman occupation of Palestine coincided with just such a decay, at least among many of the hierarchy in the community of God. At each of the previous failures there had been a prophet whose work was to increase Israel's grasp of revelation; at this last falling away the prophet was to be Christ, and revelation was to be transformed. Once again there was a faithful remnant in Israel—our Lady and St Joseph, John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon, Anna and those who were to answer the call of Christ. But the time for growth in the Old Testament sense was now past. The mustard seed planted in Abraham had, in Christ, grown to be the tree. (Lk. 13. 18-19).

In the light of the revelation of Christ it is possible to see saving history up until the moment of the Incarnation as the gradual unfolding of the way of the Lord (Mt. 3. 1-3; Mk. 1. 2-3; Lk. 3. 4-6; 4. 17-19; Is. 40. 3), the proclamation of 'the year of the Lord's favour' (Is. 41. 2; Lk. 4. 19). The first covenants, moments of God's deeper intervention in history, now give way to a new covenant which transforms and concludes saving history. The old Israel was preparing for the coming of the Kingdom of God, the new Israel, in Christ, is the kingdom of God.²

²A very good scriptural introduction to this basic fact of our redemption is to be found in *The Parables of the Kingdom* by C. H. Dodd (Revised ed. London, 1961.)

There are, of course, many references to the kingdom of God in the Gospels, but for the sake of this article it is only necessary to observe three of them.

But 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).

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel. (Mk. 1. 15).

But he said to him, 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God'. (Lk. 9. 60).

I choose these three quotations because they relate to the eschatology of Ezekiel, particularly to Ezek. 17. 22-24 and Ezek. 36. 24-36. In these passages from the synoptic Gospels, the Kingdom which 'has come upon you', 'is at hand' and is proclaimed, is the fulfillment of the Jewish longing for the future glory typified apocalyptically by the passages in Ezekiel. Dodd has a powerful passage in his chapter entitled 'Parables of Growth' in which he compares these parables in the New Testament to Ezek. 17. 22-24, in order to demonstrate that the Kingdom, the glory of Israel, is what is at stake. The old Israel has seen the period of the growth of the mustard seed, now is the time of completion, the time of the kingdom of God. In the sowing parables, the old Israel is the time of sowing, the new Israel is the time of harvest, the kingdom of God has come upon us and the glory of Israel is now present.

It is clearly of considerable importance that we think about the Church in this way, for it will govern so much of our understanding of our relationship with God. It seems to me that 'the man on the Clapham omnibus' will react to these ideas with a fairly obvious question. In non-theological terms he would be compelled to ask what the presence of God's kingdom can possibly mean. To put the same question in another way, we can see that in terms of saving history it is clear that the establishment of the Kingdom of God is the final condition to which history is working, and yet it is equally clear that we are still now living in a historical situation. How, then, can it make sense to speak of the Kingdom of God as present? The full answer to this question is in one sense impossible simply because we are faced in it with the mystery of our salvation. But as it is through Christ that we come to the Father, so it is in the person of Christ that we can see, in part, the resolution of our difficulty. The local presence of God to the world in the ark of the covenant, which was, so to say, the centre of the dialogue between God and his people, was a presence at a remove. It was at once the total revelation of God to the world, total that is to say

in the context of a world which was prepared to receive so much and no more, and a preparation for the situation in which he could be totally present to the world, and the world present to him, in the glorified *Kyrios*. The redeeming dialogue of God with man in the Old Testament is redeeming in virtue of what God was to do through the Incarnation, the Death, the Resurrection. The redemptive effects of the presence of God to the world in his chosen people are only brought to fruition in the glorification of Christ. The redemption of the whole of creation is achieved in the presence of creation to God in the *Kyrios*. The glorification of Christ, the historical moment of death and resurrection, work outwards in every direction in space and time, so as to include within the redemptive scope all of creation. The first situation, that of the old covenant, was a preparation for the possibility of a personal encounter with God through Christ; it is this personal communication, which should have been possible in Adam had he not fallen³, that God is making possible again by his intervention in history. It is a personal encounter possible only in the kingdom of God, which was not open to men until the incarnation and glorification of the Lord. For it is in the Incarnation that the local presence of God to the world becomes immediate. In becoming a man God became all the men who share in his redemptive death and resurrection through baptism (Heb. 1. 14-18). Christ's human encounter with God is our encounter with God, his divine intervention in history, the culmination of all other interventions, is his establishment of the kingdom among us in which this encounter is possible. There is nothing more to be accomplished in the history of salvation or indeed, in history generally; the whole of creation after the fall, the whole of history is directed to this event in time. The situation in which we find ourselves now is that in which the harvest has to be gathered, the kingdom completed, before the effects of its establishment are manifested.

Although God does not live in time, we do, and it remains true that this cosmic opening out of the dialogue between God and men took place as a historical event two thousand years ago. For us, historically speaking, it is an event in the past. The establishment of the Church, the kingdom of God, is an event placeable in time. But because the Church, the community which makes God actually present to the world, is the body of the risen Lord, it is the place in which we encounter God through all history. In the sacraments of the Church we are brought into the presence of the Lord and thus into the kingdom of

³See *On the Theology of Death*, Karl Rahner, London 1961, p. 42.

God; he becomes actually and effectively *our* Lord, in whose life, death and glorification our own life and death becomes redemptive. This is true of all the sacraments, but above all it is true of the mass, which constitutes us as the Church. The sacrament of the Christian assembly, holy communion, most directly involves that personal encounter within the kingdom. It is here that in the glorified Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we are brought as a community to the Father.

It is in this context that we can see most clearly the relation between the particular and general judgment, or, as we should say, the identity of the two judgments. God is the owner of the field in which the good seed was sown (Mat. 13. 24-30), he is the ruler of the kingdom. His interest, so to speak, lies in the product of the good seed, not in the weeds sown by his enemy; the harvest which is gathered, the kingdom which is ruled, are the harvest and kingdom of the saved. The community of the kingdom of God is, as a whole, the body of Christ, and it is Christ who is present to the Father; it is only in this presence that we encounter God. The possibility of this encounter is, of course, destroyed by sin. What is destroyed is our *effective* membership of the kingdom. Our acts are then no longer a part of the redeeming dialogue, can no longer work towards the building up of the kingdom of God, and, above all, our death, because it is a dying outside Christ and not the death of a Christian, is the final giving-over of ourselves to the power of Satan. Our death in this case is, however, the culmination of an increasingly decaying situation; by sin and by virtue we have placed ourselves either in a disjunction from Christ, or in a relation with Christ, which in either case is our total situation. In the latter case we are judged and seen in Christ, and what is judged in us is what Christ achieved in his death and resurrection. In the former case we are judged out of Christ and are seen as an anomaly in creation—for all of creation is involved in the kingdom, all of creation is redeemed. The situations in which the virtuous and the evil man are both living are the final situations brought about by the glorification of the *Kyrios*. I am not merely judged at the end of my life, because, just as Christ is the end of history and is now the personal encounter of mankind with God, so in that encounter or out of it I am now being judged.

An encounter with Jesus was an occasion of the bestowal of grace. But such a bestowal was possible because Jesus was to become the risen Lord. In the Incarnation is to be seen a mode of the existence of the second person of the Trinity, but its importance for us rests in the fact that in the glorified *Kyrios* the upward movement of worship from creation to

God is made both possible and acceptable. 'In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (John 16. 33) and 'God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts. 2. 36) are both instances of the affirmation of the kingship of Christ, for now, no matter what terrible things may come, they cannot effect the basic reconciliation of creation to God and the encounter with him sacramentally within the kingdom. All situations whatever are now placeable in terms of this reconciliation. They are of the kingdom or not, as they are so effected by sin or by virtue. The disjunction brought about by mortal sin is in effect the judgment because it induces a situation in the sinner which has no place in the kingdom of God; his death in mortal sin simply leads to the consummation of an intolerable situation. The final judgment is an affirmation of the communal nature of man and of his unity with Christ. It is the completion of the encounter with God, the making present of the effects of a relationship already enjoyed by the just in the community of Christ. It is not simply that the justice of Christ will be *seen* to be done; this is true, of course, but it is not the real point. The last judgment, the general resurrection and the transformation of the world will coincide with the completion of the kingdom of God, the completion of the community of Christ—a community the totality of whose encounter with God through Christ is only made possible through the totality of the body of Christ; a totality in which all of creation is glorified and from which all elements that do not belong to the kingdom have been excluded. In this sense there is no separation between what is done at the particular judgment and what is done at the general judgment. In the former is seen association or dissociation with Christ, in the latter is seen the fruit of that association or dissociation, but both are existentially present to us now as concomitants of the establishment of the kingdom of God under the glorified *Kyrios*.