The Kingdom of God as the Goal of Mission

When Jesus began exercising his mission in public, he proclaimed the good news : "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). How different from some contemporary projects of mission that consciously aim at "planting the Church"! One of the reasons for this change is the progressive identification between the Kingdom, Jesus and the Church. Jesus not only proclaims the Kingdom, but realizes it in his life, death and resurrection. Therefore Jesus is the Kingdom in person. So the invitation to "believe in the Gospel" becomes "believe in Jesus". Jesus founded the Church. Through its preaching and sacramental ministry, it continues the work of Jesus. It is the visible realization of the Kingdom in the world. Proclaiming the Kingdom today therefore becomes proclaiming the Church. To 'plant the Church' is seen as equivalent to establishing the Kingdom.

We see here a series of identifications, where one should rather have seen relationships. It is true that in other circumstances one would speak of Jesus as the *sacrament* of the encounter with God.[1] One would also speak of the Church as the *sacrament* of "communion with God and unity among all men".[2] In the traditional way of speaking 'sacrament' implied a distinction between sacrament (symbol) and reality. Such a notion of symbol is somehow forgotten when one comes to speak of the goal of mission. The affirmation of the Kingdom as the proper goal of mission is therefore not a new discovery, but the re-discovery of an old truth. I shall devote my attention to the exploration of the

1. Cf. Schillebeeckx E., ***Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*** (London, Sheed and Ward, 1963)
2. ***Lumen Gentium,*** 1.

idea itself and of its consequences for the praxis of mission today.

Different Meanings of the Kingdom

The occasion of the re-discovery of the Kingdom as the goal of mission has been the discovery of the place of other religions in God's plan of salvation. God's Kingdom is not a territory, nor a people. God exercises his sovereignty in the very act of saving people through the communication of his life to those who are ready to accept this self-gift. God's life transforms the persons and their communities and reaches out to the universe which they inhabit. Those who think that this self-communication is limited to the structures of the Church identify the Kingdom with the Church But those who become aware through experience that God is offering his saving self-communication also to other religious believers, not only in spite of their religions, but rather in and through their religions, see that the Kingdom as God's saving action reaches out to a wider group of people than the Church.

Before proceeding further with our reflection, it may be better to see more clearly how we understand the term and the reality of the Kingdom. As a matter of fact, the term is used in many overlapping senses and may cause confusion if we do not make our meaning more precise. I would like to point to three among the many possible meanings of the term. They are complementary, as we shall see.

First of all, the Kingdom may be seen as the future of the Church. The Church is in a situation of already-not yet. It is the beginnings of the Kingdom. It is the progressive realization of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is what the Church will become as history merges into eschatology. The Church is the visible, though partial, presence of the Kingdom in history. To build the Church is to build the Kingdom. The Church grows into the Kingdom by being

'planted' in different cultural areas and by integrating the 'good and holy' elements from those cultural and religious traditions. The Church becomes catholic or universal in this way. It could even claim that whatever is good anywhere already belongs to it. The Kingdom is the fulfilment of the Church. The world is simply the context of this growth. One can see that the Church and the Kingdom are closely related, almost in linear fashion. This is the more traditional view. It is normally linked to the discussion of New Testament eschatology.[3]

A second way of looking at the Kingdom places it more in the world as different from the Church. The Kingdom is seen as the new humanity of freedom and fellowship, love and justice. The world is full of injustice and oppression, hatred and discrimination. The Church is in mission in this world in order to witness to and to promote the values of the Gospel and transform the world into the Kingdom. This Kingdom as a new humanity is not simply a promise for the future. It is not a pie in the sky, a reality of the next world, to be hoped for after death. It is a new community that we can and we are called to realize here and now in history.[4] The completion of our task is eschatological. But the challenge for us is to start now and continue doing what we can, while remembering God's promise and keeping alive hope. We are called to collaborate with all people of good will in the building up of the Kingdom. The liberation theologians are often accused of promoting an earthly, historical, secular Kingdom, almost independant of the Church. However, this vision of the Kingdom underlines the fact that while the Kingdom is God's gift, it is also our task. It is God who gives the hundredfold of the harvest. But we have to sow, to plant and to water.

3. Cf. Beasley-Murray G. R., ***Jesus and the Kingdom of God***, (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1986)

4. Cf. Gutierrez G., ***A Theology of Liberation*** (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1988)

The Kingdom and Other Religions

In the context of a positive view of other religions, the term Kingdom is used in still another sense. As Creator and Redeemer God's action embraces the whole universe and all peoples. God is present and active everywhere. His power is never absent anywhere, at any time. God's Reign is co-extensive with the cosmos and with history. God's saving action manifests itself in various ways through the Word and the Spirit. It manifests itself in a unique way in Jesus, the incarnate Word. In Christ's death and resurrection God commits himself in a special way and his saving action in the world enters a decisive stage. But God's action in Christ must not be separated from God's ongoing action in the Word and in the Spirit.

God's action is not therefore limited to a particular group of people who make up the Church. The Church indeed is called and sent into the world with a mission. But this mission does not replace God's own action in the world. God has not retired back to high heaven after sending the Church into the world. God continues to be active. The Kingdom is the sphere of God's action in which he is establishing his reign. God's Kingdom is not something that we humans build up. It is always God's action, God's gift. All that we can do is to be open to it, receive it, set no obstacles in its way, let it take hold of us and become active in us. We continue to pray: "Thy Kingdom come!" The Church is not to replace the Kingdom. It is not called to build the Kingdom. It is called to prepare for it. Like every human being, the Christian too is called to conversion because God is here, particularly in Jesus Christ. As a Christian he hears another call to witness in word and deed to God's action in Jesus Christ. This is his mission But this mission is always in view of the Kingdom of God, that is God's saving action in the world. The Church is the community of such people who feel specially called and who commit themselves in baptism to be bearers of this mission.

The Church then is called to be the symbol and servant of the Kingdom. It proclaims God and his Kingdom, not itself.[5]

God's saving action is also mediated through other religions. God speaks through many prophets (Heb 1:1) and people respond to God in various ways guided by their culture and tradition. The focus of this salvific dialogue are not religious structures and rituals. It is doing justice, loving and serving the others, especially those who are most in need. It is healing the sick and visiting those in prison. It is sharing bread with the hungry and clothing the naked. It is here that God's saving action becomes manifest in human action and his Kingdom becomes present (Mt. 25: 31-46).

The Kingdom of God therefore is not identified with any one religion. It transcends all of them. It is God's action. It may be symbolically mediated in more or less authentic ways. The Church is aware of a special call and a particular role of symbolic mediation in the history of the ongoing action of God. But it should never pretend to substitute God's saving action.[6]

The Vision of the Vatican Council

The roots of this new, though re-discovered, vision go back to Vatican II. Reacting to a tradition of seeing

5. Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Once Again... Church and Kingdom", ***Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*** 57 (1993) 6-25; Dupuis, J., "The Church, the Reign of God and the 'Others' ", ***Pro Dialogo*** 85-86 (1994) 107-130; Fullenbach, J. ***The Kingdom of God*** (Indore, Satprakashan, 1994), pp. 344-362; Amaladoss, M., "Evangelization in Asia: A New Focus", ***East Asian Pastoral Review*** 23 (1986) 440-461; Amaladoss, M., "Les nouveaux visages de la mission", ***Mission de l'Eglise*** 106 (Dec. 94) 3-17.

6. It is a classical position in theology that while a true ***sacramentum*** does not exist without the ***res*** (the reality), the ***res*** can always exist without the ***sacramentum***.

mission as the 'planting of the Church' and searching for an adequate theological foundation, the Council contemplates the mystery of God's action in the world. The mission of the Church has its origin in the mission of God, that is of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, which flows from the "fountain-like love" of God the Father.

> God in his great and merciful kindness freely creates us and moreover, graciously calls us to share in his life and glory. He generously pours out, and never ceases to pour out, his divine goodness, so that he who is creator of all things might at last become "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), thus simultaneously assuring his own glory and our happiness.[7]

This mission of God therefore covers the whole of humanity and the whole of history (Jo 1:1-9). God's further effort to manifest his boundless love in the incarnation of the Word (Jo 1:14) and in the paschal mystery of his life, death and resurrection does not in any way limit his universal salvific will (Eph. 1:3-10), which reaches out even to the whole of creation (Rom. 8:19-27). The Council underlines this in two ways. On the one hand, it affirms that by his incarnation, "the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each man"[8] and grace is active invisibly in the hearts of all men of good will.

> Since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.[9]

7. *Ad Gentes*, 2.
8. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.
9. *Ibid.*

To this free and graceful initiative of God corresponds the freedom of each human person to respond.

> The highest norm of human life is the divine law itself - eternal, objective and universal, by which God orders, directs and governs the whole world and the ways of the human community according to a plan conceived in his wisdom and love. God has enabled man to participate in this law of his so that, under the gentle disposition of divine providence, many may be able to arrive at a deeper knowledge of unchangeable truth. For this reason everybody has the duty and consequently the right to seek the truth in religious matters so that, through the use of appropriate means, he may prudently form judgements of conscience which are sincere and true.[10]

When we speak of the Kingdom in the context of other religions, it is to this universal plan and action of God that we are referring. The salvific dialogue between God, Creator and Redeemer, and people is ongoing and universal, limited only by the freedom of God calling and the freedom of the people responding. As the Council says :

> God who creates and conserves all things by his Word, provides men with constant evidence of himself... and he has never ceased to take care of the human race, for he wishes to give eternal life to all who seek salvation through perseverance in doing good.[11]

This dialogue is mediated through a multiplicity of symbolic, social and historical ways. All these ways are

10. ***Dignitatis Humanae,*** 3.

11. ***Dei Verbum,*** 3.

not equally significant. Speaking through the prophets is not the same as speaking through the Word made flesh (Heb 1:1). The differences between these mediations may be obvious. Their inter-relationships, since it is the same God who is speaking, can be explored only *a posteriori*, in history and through dialogue. But beyond these differences there is the constant mystery of God calling and people responding. This mystery is one of communion since the people are sharing in one and the same life of God. But it can be contemplated only in and through the diversity of its symbolic mediations.

The Vision of John Paul II

It is this communion of all peoples in the life of God that John Paul II is affirming when he says :

> If it is the order of unity that goes back to creation and redemption and is therefore, in this sense, "divine", such differences - and even religious divergences - go back rather to a "human fact", and must be overcome in progress towards the realization of the mighty plan of unity which dominates the creation. There are undeniably differences that reflect the genius and the spiritual "riches" which God has given to the people (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 11). I am not referring to these divergences; I intend here to speak of the differences in which are revealed the limitation, the evolutions and the falls of the human spirit which is undermined by the spirit of evil in history (*Lumen Gentium*, 16).[12]

John Paul II affirms here not only the unity of the divine plan, but also distinguishes between the God-given and human differences. The God-given differences have to

12. Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, ***Bulletin*** 64 (1987) 56-57.

be carefully safe-guarded. In *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II speaks more explicitly of the Kingdom.

> The Kingdom is the concern of every one : individuals, society, and the world. Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness (15)... It is true that the Church is not an and unto herself, since she is ordered toward the Kingdom of God, of which she is the seed, sign and instrument (18)... The Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the Kingdom (20).

The Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences puts it more succinctly:

> The focus of the Church's mission of evangelization is building up the Kingdom of God and building up the Church to be at the service of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is, therefore, wider than the Church. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, making it visible, ordained to it, promoting it, but not equating itself to it.[13]

The only criticism I would make to this statement is that the building up of the Kingdom is not our activity but God's, the Spirit's. We can only collaborate by responding, receiving. That is why we speak about the mission of God.

The Goal of Mission

When we think of the Kingdom as the goal of mission we have to take together all the three dimensions that I have indicated above for a holistic view. The Kingdom is first of

13. *FABC Papers* 48, p. 16.

all God's ongoing salvific action in the world, which is mediated also through other religions. Here God's action is primary. All that we are 'missioned' to do is at the service of God's action. Secondly, God's salvific action is oriented to the full realization of God's plan to reconcile all things when God will be all in all. The Kingdom is also a vision and a goal in the future. But in the light of the first perspective, it is no longer seen only as the future of the Church. The Church as symbol and servant is related to the Kingdom, both as it is active in the world now and as it is hoped for in the future. The other religions too are, in some way, ordained to the Kingdom. Thirdly, the Kingdom is not merely an invisible, transcendent reality now and in the future; it becomes visible in a historical movement, in a human community, where the loving concern of God is manifested in the love of people for each other and where the poor and the suffering particularly find their liberation. We may like to identify this with the Church. But here too the Church remains in a dialectical relationship of symbol and servant to the reality. The actualizations of the values of the Kingdom, namely freedom, fellowship and justice, in human communities are, obviously, not limited to the Church.

We see this triple dimension of the Kingdom in the life and proclamation of Jesus. Jesus reveals God's unconditional love which he himself has experienced in his relationship to God as *abba* and invites people to turn to God. The concrete way in which one is called to respond to God's love is the love and service of the other, especially the poor and the suffering. God's love, present and active in the world in our love for each other, liberates us and reconciles us and leads us to the fulness of life, which is communion with God and with each other (Jo 17).

The identity and mission of the Church has to be specified in this context of the Kingdom as the mission of God. However the relationship between the Church and

the Kingdom may be described, the Church is not meant to be a substitute for the Kingdom. Its retationship to the Kingdom is not exclusive.

What are the consequences for mission of seeing the Kingdom or God's reign as its goal?

Mission as Contemplation and Dialogue

If we see our own mission as a call and a sending to be at the service of the mission of God, then *it starts as contemplation, becomes dialogue and continues as prophecy.* If God is indeed active everywhere and at all times in ways unknown to us then, even before we begin speaking about the Good News, we are invited to contemplate the mystery of God. This contemplation is not an abstract exercise, but an effort to 'seek and find God in all things', to discover God in the lives of the people and their history, to become aware of their ongoing relationship to God, not only in the secret of their conscience, but in their social relationships and activity in the course of their history. This contemplation is best done in the process of a dialogue. We discover God active in people's lives, not only by looking at their myths and symbols, but much more by listening to their own religious/spiritual experiences and stories. People often become fully conscious of their own experiences only in being challenged to share it with some one else. Such a sharing is triggered when the listener too shares his/her own experience of God. The exchange then becomes a dialogue of spiritual experiences. Such dialogue would normally lead to an experience of deep communion in God. As John Paul II said to leaders of other religions in Madras:

> By dialogue we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God.[14]

14. February 5, 1986.

In this very act of seeking to discern the experience of God in the life ot the others, we disclose our own experience of God in Christ and in the Spirit. Such a sharing of experience can only be mutually enriching. Though both groups have experienced the same God their experiences are not the same. The variety is due both to God's own freedom in manifesting God's self in diverse ways and to the conditioning of the people by the circumstances of culture, history and free personal response. The experience of the others then is perceived as different and challenging. This challenge can be seen as prophetic. There is mutual prophecy. Our own prophetic challenge is the proclamation of the Good News of the Word becoming human in Jesus and realizing God's definitive act of salvation in his death and resurrection. This Good News, of course, will be credible and challenging only if it is seen, on the one hand, as experienced and lived by us and, on the other, as being in continuity with their own experience of God.

I venture to say that it is wise to leave the form of response to the freedoms of God who calls and the person called. Under all its various modalities it is always a movement of conversion to God and to the others in love and service. But, for all kinds of historical, cultural, social and personal, or even providential reasons such conversion may not involve a call to membership in the Church-community The historical and cultural limitedness and immobility of the Church may at least be partly responsible for this.

Let us look a little more closely at this movement of response or conversion in the context of the Kingdom.

Conversion to God

The proclamation by Jesus of God as loving Father/Mother demands on the part of the humans a response. This response is a turning towards God. It consists in a double movement: turning away from love of cneself and turning

to the love of God. This love of God is concretly manifested in the love of the other. Jesus said: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love... This is my commandment: love one another as I love you" (Jo 15:9,12). To put it in another way: conversion to God involves adherence to the values of the Kingdom. In the life and preaching of Jesus these have been spelt out as freedom, fellowship and justice.[15] One cannot love God and the other, if one is not freed from all that enslaves one. The Spirit of God is a Spirit of freedom (Rom. 8:14-27). This freedom finds expression in the gift of oneself to the other and leads to fellowship and community. Love of the other takes particular care of the poor and the oppressed. It promotes justice. It seeks to change the hearts and the structures that are causes of injustice and oppression, because without justice neither love nor community is possible. Therefore to turn to God is to commit oneself to freedom, fellowship and love in one's own life and in the life of the community.

The group of the disciples of Jesus should be such a community of people-even a movement-to actualize and to promote such values in the world. But unfortunately the Church is not experienced as such a community by others, whatever may be the self-awareness of the Church itself. The Church has confessed itself to be a pilgrim. Today we realize more and more that its limitedness is not only in relation to the future Kingdom, but also in relation to its own ideal image. Does this not indicate that our own images of the Church and its mission in relation to the Kingdom must change in the light of our experience?

In the light of the differentiation between the Church and the Kingdom, however this may be further specified, I

15. Cf. George Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society" in Amalorpavadass D. S. (ed), ***The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*** (Bangalore, NBCLC, 1981), pp. 579-608.

would suggest that God's call to conversion is multi-faceted, as seen in our experience. God calls every one to be converted to the Kingdom, that is to say, to respond to Gods' offer of love and life by building up a community of freedom, fellowship and justice. God calls some to be witnesses in deed and word of the definitive act of realization of God's plan for the world in Jesus. The second vocation is at the service of the first. The sacrament of Baptism therefore is not simply the gift of salvation, which is made available to every one by the Spirit in ways unknown to us, but a call to mission. Every election in God's plan of salvation is not a privilege nor a claim to superiority, but a call to service, a responsibility, which some of the prophets tried to run away from, experiencing it as a burden.[16] As the awareness that the Church is not the exclusive way of salvation grows, though all salvation is in Christ and in the Spirit, the Church's mission cannot be identified with God's mission, but must find a place, however particular, within it.

A Kingdom of/for the Poor

The Kingdom of God, whatever be its dimensions of mystery, is not a purely otherworldly reality, seen whether as future or as transcendent. The life and preaching of Jesus shows it as irrupting into history. God's loving kindness manifests itself particularly as care and liberation for the poor and the needy. We see this in Jesus' own self awareness (Lk 4:18-19). We see it in his life and praxis : in his table fellowship with the poor and the outcastes, with the publicans and the sinners (Mk 2:15-17). His expectations of his followers are clear: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those who are sick or in prison, etc. (Mt 25: 31-46). The beatitudes present his own image of the new humanity of the Kingdom (Mt 5:3-12 and Lk 6:20-23). His own experience offers a confirmation of God's special con-

16. Cf. Is 6:5; Jer 1:6; Jonah 1:3.

cern for the poor (Mt 11:25-30). Mary's experience is the same (Lk 1:46-55).

The conclusion seems inescapable to me: the Kingdom of God, in its manifestation in history, has everything to do with the poor and their liberation. There is no talk here of an earthly Kingdom. But it is a question of attitudes, relationships and actions. It describes a process and a sign. It suggests a criterion to judge every claim made in the name of the Kingdom. It does not offer an economic or political blue-print. It is an invitation to a permanent revolution.[17]

Conclusion

Seeing the Kingdom as the goal of mission has many important consequences for the practice of mission. I shall point to only one of them. What do we imagine our role, as people in mission, to be: ambassadors or messengers? We are called to proclaim Jesus, his Good News, the plan of God for the world, the Kingdom. Unfortunately we have tended to see ourselves-the Church-as representatives, with a right to demand obedience to ourselves, in the name of God. Becoming aware of the mystery of the mission of God is to become humble, to empty ourselves, to be servants of a mystery that we do not possess or dominate. To talk of the mystery of mission is not to devalue, but to reaffirm the presence and action of God in history, through the Word, also become incarnate, and through the Spirit. But it does question our easy reduction of the Kingdom to the Church and of mystery to history. The rediscovery of the Kingdom helps us to contextualize our own mission as pilgrimage and prophecy.

A call to conversion is primarily, always and everywhere, a call to turn to God, to transform our lives, to love the other and to do justice. It is always inspired by the

17. Cf. Soares-Prabhu, *art cit.*, p. 607.

Spirit, though God's call may be heard through a variety of mediations. It is unfortunate that this mystery is reduced in popular speech to the sociological sphere of changing allegiance between religious groups. We do not exclude the possibility of God reaching out to some in a special way and calling them to join particular social groups, with particular roles in the overall plan of God for the world. But God's call is always to turn to God in love and obedience, contemplating God's mystery, sharing God's life in communion with others and doing justice in self-giving and service.

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