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Chapter 4

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

The first thing that strikes one in beginning to analyze the reality of Jesus of Nazareth is that he did not make himself the focus of his preaching and mission. Jesus knew himself, lived and worked from something and for something distinct from himself. This fact, which can be deduced from faith if one accepts that Jesus was truly a human being and behaved in a manner appropriate to a creature, emerges incontrovertibly from the Gospels. Jesus' life was an outward-directed one, directed to something very different from himself.

In the Gospels this something central in Jesus' life is expressed by two terms: "Kingdom of God" and "Father." Of both, the first thing to say is that they are authentic words of Jesus. The second is that they are all-embracing, since by "Kingdom of God" Jesus expresses the whole of reality and of what is to be done, and by "Father" Jesus expresses the personal reality that gives final meaning to his life, that in which he rests and what in turn does not allow him to rest. Finally, "Kingdom of God" and "Father" are systematically important realities for theology, giving it a basis on which better to organize and grade Jesus' multiple external activities, to conjecture his inner being and, undoubtedly, to explain his historical fate of dying on the cross.

Both realities, Kingdom and Father, though distinct and not simply interchangeable, complement one another, and so "the Kingdom explains God's being *abba* and the Fatherhood of God provides a basis for and explanation of the Kingdom."¹ In making an analysis, however, one has to choose to begin with one or the other, and here I begin with Jesus' relationship to the Kingdom, because this is how the Gospels begin, because they give a lot of information on it, and because, I think, one can approach Jesus' overall reality better by starting from his external activities on behalf of the Kingdom and moving from there to his inner relationship with God, than one can by working the other way round.

1. The Final Reality for Jesus: the Kingdom of God

Both Mark and Matthew present the start of Jesus' public ministry in these words:

"... Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news from God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15; Matt. 4:17). In Luke the start of his public life takes place in the synagogue at Nazareth with the proclamation of the good news to the poor and the liberation of the oppressed (Luke 4:18), but Jesus himself relates the good news to the Kingdom: "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose" (4:43, cf. 8:1). The Q source sums up Jesus' mission programmatically in terms of good news to the poor (see Matt. 11:2-5; Luke 7:18-22), which is equivalent to the good news of the Kingdom.

The Synoptics make this initial presentation of Jesus from the standpoint of the Kingdom with the clear intention of putting forward a programmatic summary of his mission. Because of this, because of the high number of times the expression appears in the Synoptics, nearly always put into Jesus' mouth, and because it appears in very varied contexts in his preaching (parables, apocalyptic discourses, exhortations, ethical demands, prayer), there can be no doubt of the historical and theological centrality of the Kingdom of God for Jesus himself. Said from what is denied, "Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God and not himself."² Said from what is affirmed, "the central theme of Jesus' preaching was the true sovereignty of God."³

It is clear, then, that the final reality for Jesus was not himself,⁴ but neither was it the purely ahistorical transcendence suggested by "Kingdom of heaven,"⁵ and of course it was not the church.⁶ But if this is clear and generally accepted today, we still need to make explicit what has until now remained implicit: not only did Jesus not preach himself, but the final reality for him was not simply "God" but "the Kingdom of God." There is of course no debate about the fact that Jesus preached and spoke of God as Father, and that this Father was his final personal reference, whom he also offered to others—all of which will be examined in the next chapter. What I want to stress here is that for Jesus even "God" is seen within a wider reality: "the Kingdom of God."

This means that Jesus expresses final reality in a dual unity or in a unified duality. In the final reality there is always God and something that is not God. And therefore we have to speak of God *and* of the Kingdom; or, in other words, we have to speak of God *and* of a will carried out by God, of God *and* of the people of God, and so on. For Jesus, therefore, final reality has a transcendent dimension and a historical dimension. The latter depends on the former and what the "Kingdom" might be depends on what "God" might be (so, for example, the coming of the Kingdom is presented differently by John the Baptist and by Jesus, because they had different understandings of God); inversely, though, understanding of God will depend on what the Kingdom is seen to be. What needs to be stressed is that, for Jesus, God is not a reality that could be not linked to history, or history to God, but the relationship of God to history is essential to God.

The reason for this conception of God held by Jesus is known and has its roots deep in the Old Testament; it still needs to be re-emphasized. God never appears

as a God-in-himself, but as a God for history, and, therefore, as the God-of-a-people. "I will be your God and you shall be my people" is Israel's confession of faith. In this, an essentially relational God is proclaimed, who *reveals himself* and who *is* in relation to a people. However different the traditions of God in the Old Testament may be, they have this in common: that God is a God-*of*, a God-*for*, a God-*in*, never a God-in-himself. So, in Exodus, God is the one who listens to the cry of the people in order to set them free and form them into a nation and make them God's people. In the prophetic traditions, God is the one who defends the oppressed, denouncing oppressors and proclaiming a new covenant with God's people. In the apocalyptic traditions, God is the one who will re-form his people and the whole of creation eschatologically. In the wisdom traditions, God still appears as provident, and in reflections on his silence, it is an active and speaking silence; it is not the mere absence of God from history, but a silence that makes itself felt. On the basis of these traditions, Jesus, too, understands final reality as a dual unity, a God who gives himself to history or a history that comes to be according to God.⁷ This dual unity, which is final reality, is what is formally meant by the expression "Kingdom of God" and is what Jesus preached.

Nevertheless, we are faced with a paradox here. Jesus often speaks of the Kingdom of God, but never says what it actually is. "Jesus never tells us expressly *what* this Kingdom of God is. All he says is *that* it is at hand."⁸ Not even in the so-called parables of the Kingdom does Jesus define what the Kingdom might be; though he stresses its novelty, its demands, its scandal..., he never defines it, "he never clarifies the concept of 'God's sovereignty' as such."⁹

It has to be said that we should not be surprised on principle by Jesus' non-definition of what the Kingdom of God is. In another context and using different language, the Synoptics state that the day of the Kingdom is not known by Jesus himself, but only by God (Mark 13:32); that is, that knowledge of the final reality, of the Kingdom, belongs to God alone. If Jesus had defined it, he would have gone beyond his own historicity and his appearance on earth would not have been in human form. From this we should not conclude, needless to say, that Jesus knew nothing about the Kingdom or that this was just an empty phrase for him. What we can deduce is the need for a method for verifying what Jesus thought about the Kingdom of God. I am going to put forward three ways by which this verification might proceed.

The first way, and the one most commonly used in theology,¹⁰ is what can be called the *notional way*, which examines the notion Jesus had of the Kingdom by comparing it with earlier notions in Israel. It starts from Jesus' historical consciousness, dependent in this, as in so many other things, on the Old Testament. In this sense, it shows that Jesus did not proclaim anything absolutely new to his listeners, but that what was new with him was his concentration on the already familiar theme of the Kingdom of God. "The essentially traditional expectation of the coming Kingdom of God was changed into the one decisive perspective."¹¹ It is also notable that Jesus used the terminology of the Kingdom, whereas "the terms which in the

biblical and Judaic tradition usually denoted salvation are absent from or very rare in Jesus' preaching."¹²

A second way, rarely used in theology, is what might be called the *way of the addressee*, and Jesus' addressees were, as we shall see, the poor. If Jesus' proclamation shows a correlation between the Kingdom and his audience, then the latter can tell us something about the former; this applies more if the Kingdom of God is presented not only as a *truth*, but as *good news*, since then the addressees will intrinsically clarify what is "good" in the news.¹³

A third way is the *way of the practice* of Jesus—understanding practice in the broad sense of his words and actions—on the basis that what Jesus said and did was in the service of proclaiming the Kingdom. As Edward Schillebeeckx says, "its specific content stems from the whole of Jesus' activity."¹⁴ This methodological choice is sometimes imposed by Jesus himself when he relates his activity specifically to the Kingdom, in casting out demons, for example. It is also possible since many of Jesus' activities effectively express signs of what was understood by the Kingdom of God, as in his meals. And it is at least probable on the basis that Jesus' preaching and activities were intrinsically related.

These methodological reflections on how to establish what the Kingdom of God meant for Jesus are not mere abstractions. Modern theology, even its progressive wings, generally uses what I have called the notional way, sometimes adding the way of practice, but generally ignores the way of the addressee, on which liberation theology insists. And the resulting conclusions are very different.

2. The Notional Way: the Hoped-for Utopia in the Midst of the Sufferings of History

I propose to start by analyzing briefly the notions of the Kingdom of God in the Old Testament, those most current at the time of Jesus and the new elements Jesus brought to these notions.

(a) *The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament*

The expression "Kingdom of God" (*malkuta Jahvewh*, *basiliea tou theou*) is a late apocalyptic formulation,¹⁶ but associating Yahweh with kingship is common in the Old Testament, above all in the Psalms and liturgy. This terminology is not original or specific to Israel, but existed throughout the ancient Near East. What Israel did—as it did with other aspects of the surrounding religions—was to historicize the notion of God-king, in accordance with its fundamental belief that Yahweh intervenes in history. "When Israel became integrated into the institution, originally foreign to it, of monarchy, it also took over its symbols to express its belonging to the God who saved it and made it his."¹⁷

This kingship of Yahweh—his capacity for intervening in history—was presented with differing emphases and dimensions throughout the history of Israel. So in the time of Moses, Yahweh's leadership was stressed, and at the time of the Judges, his exclusivity. During the monarchy—not without serious theological

conflicts—the kingship of Yahweh was made compatible with that of the king of Israel, who was adopted by Yahweh. It was not till after the failure of the monarchy, through the national catastrophes of exile, captivity and occupation by foreign powers, that a clearer idea emerged of what the hoped-for reign of God was: a future as a kingdom of justice for Israel as a people within the boundaries of Israel. Apocalyptic universalized this expectation, extending it even to the bounds of the cosmos; it also, thanks to its historical pessimism, eschatologized it: that is, made the appearance of the reign of God coincide with the end of time, when the definitive renovation of all reality and the resurrection of the dead will take place, since this world as it is cannot receive God.

So confession of the kingship of Yahweh is basic to Israel and runs right through its history; it is another way of saying that God acts in history and takes Israel's side. But we need to be clear about what was formally understood by this kingship if we are to avoid the misunderstandings that the term "kingdom" can produce today. "The Kingdom of God" is not a geo-political entity (although it expresses the hope of a particular people) in the sense that medieval Christendom, for example, understood it, so that the church was for practical purposes taken as being the geographical confines that separated it from the infidels. Nor is it directly a "cultic-ascendent" entity, meaning for example that Israel recognized Yahweh alone as its king, though Israel undoubtedly did so in its liturgy in response to Yahweh.¹⁸

The Kingdom of God has two essential connotations: (1) that God rules in his acts, (2) that it exists in order to transform a bad and unjust historical-social reality into a different good and just one. So the term "reign" of God is actually more appropriate than "kingdom" of God. As the psalm says: "for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth" (Ps. 96:13). So God's "reign" is then the positive action through which God transforms reality and God's "Kingdom" is what comes to pass in this world when God truly reigns: a history, a society, a people transformed according to the will of God. And the first thing to note about it is that "the main characteristic of this Kingdom is that God carries out the royal idea of justice."¹⁹ The Kingdom of God is, then, a highly positive reality, good news, but also a reality highly critical of the bad and unjust present.

There are three aspects of this reign of God awaited by Israel that are vital if we are to understand it properly and avoid distorting it. The first is its real incidence on human history, meaning that it is a historical, not a trans-historical reality, and this is why historical hope runs right through the Old Testament, even though apocalyptic eschatologizes it and puts it back to the end of time. Despite the variations in Israel's hope, its essence consists in that "the resignation that confines God to the nebulous beyond of ideals and that goes with the immutability of the world is completely alien to it."²⁰ Israel holds to the fact that God can change bad and unjust reality into good and just reality as essential to its faith. Therefore, the Kingdom of God corresponds to a *hope in history*.

The second is that God's action impinges directly on the transformation of the

whole of society, the whole of a people. Israel certainly understood the reality of individuals, of persons, for whom God has saving demands and plans: that their hearts of stone be changed into hearts of flesh (Ezek. 36:26ff). "Kingdom of God," however, formally designates the utopia of God for a whole people. Put in telling symbols, that conflict should turn into reconciliation, and so the wolf and the lamb may eat together (Isa. 11:6); that war should turn into peace, and so swords be made into ploughshares (Isa. 2:4); that injustice should turn into justice and life become possible, and so those who work the land may enjoy the fruits of the land and those who build houses may live in them (Isa. 65:21ff); so God may be the one who speaks first and writes his law on our hearts (Jer. 31:33). In short, that in contrast to the present reality, "new heavens and a new earth" may appear (Isa. 65:17). Our response to the Kingdom of God, then, has to be not just hope, but *hope as a people*, of a whole people and for a whole people.

The third thing is that the Kingdom of God appears as good news in the midst of bad things, in the midst of the *anti-Kingdom*, that is. The Kingdom of God will not arrive, so to speak, from a *tabula rasa*, but from and against the anti-Kingdom that is formally and actively opposed to it. The Kingdom of God is, then, a dialectical and conflictual reality, excluding and opposing the anti-Kingdom. Our response to the Kingdom of God has to be, therefore, in no way an ingenuous hope, but hoping against hope—in the late Pauline expression of Romans 4:18—and an *active and fighting* hope against the anti-Kingdom.

To sum up, the Kingdom of God is a utopia that answers the age-old hope of a people in the midst of historical calamities; it is, then, what is good and wholly good. But it is also something liberating, since it arrives in the midst of and in opposition to the oppression of the anti-Kingdom. It needs and generates a hope that is also liberating, from the understandable despair built up in history from the evidence that what triumphs in history is the anti-Kingdom.²¹

(b) Expectation of the Kingdom at the Time of Jesus: John the Baptist

Expectations of the Kingdom appeared in different shapes at the time of Jesus. The Pharisees and Sadducees scrutinized the signs of the times for evidence of the coming of the Kingdom. The Essenes and the Pharisees tried to hasten its coming through a life of purity, contemplation and observance of the law. There were also groups who tried to hasten its advent through armed violence aimed at bringing in a theocracy, though it is very unlikely that the armed anti-Roman Zealot movement was already in existence in the time of Jesus.²² Some years after his death, the Zealots certainly appeared on the scene, formulating their goal in terms of the Kingdom of God. So Flavius Josephus tells of a messiah who sought to enter Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives with an armed band, seeking to install the Kingdom of God. Later, in 70 CE, when the Romans stormed the Temple, they met six thousand Jews awaiting the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Whatever shape they took, what is certain is that great expectations existed at the time of Jesus and that he was understood in relation to these, insofar as he

confirmed them, modified them or replaced them. This can be examined through a little detour to analyze the figure of John the Baptist and his relation to Jesus; this will show what he taught about such expectations and also help to get to know Jesus, who was quite possibly a disciple of John.²³

John the Baptist appeared in the desert, announcing God's imminent coming in terms of the "judgment of God," not the "kingdom of God."²⁴ So the (redactional) formulation in Matthew: "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2) would be designed to show the parallels between Jesus and John. But, although he did not use the terminology of the "kingdom," John did give a response to the expectations of his time, one unexpected for the force of its threat. God was coming and was coming eschatologically with imminent wrath. "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees" (Luke 3:9); hence the appeal to conversion: only this can save, not belonging to the people of Israel. John appears, then, as a prophet denouncing the sin of the people, announcing the coming of God and his radical judgment. Faced with this, there is one possibility and only one: conversion, expressed in baptism for the forgiveness of sins and effected in "bearing fruit worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8). In the midst of the wrath of God to come, John does proclaim something that is good news: the possibility of salvation in baptism, and something that is eschatological: the unification of the true Israel.²⁵

This message and the person of the Baptist had a great influence at the time of Jesus, even on Jesus himself. The Gospels tell that he allowed himself to be baptized by John, and this event seems to be incontrovertibly historical. The communities could not have invented a scene in which Jesus appears being baptized with the rest of the people (Luke 3:21), without distinguishing himself from the rest (John 1:26, 31), and with a baptism that was specifically for the forgiveness of sins.

Furthermore, the fact that Jesus allowed himself to be baptized by John—a sign of inferiority in relation to John—cannot have failed to cause indignation in the early communities, when after Jesus' resurrection John's disciples continued to baptize (Acts 19:1-7) and competition between Jesus' and John's disciples continued to exist, a fact echoed in the Gospels and Acts: the fasting of John's disciples was contrasted to the non-fasting of Jesus' (Mark 2:18ff); Jesus' disciples also baptized (John 3:22ff)—though John states that Jesus himself did not (4:2-3)—and baptized more people than John's (4:1); disciples who had previously followed John became disciples of Jesus (1:35-42).

A final proof of the historicity of Jesus' baptism by John is that the baptismal scene was re-written so as to leave no doubt of Jesus' superiority over John, even though Jesus had accepted being baptized by John. In Mark, who seems to be using a pre-synoptic tradition, the baptism is described sparsely (1:9). Matthew, out of doctrinal concern, prefigures the scene with a dialogue between Jesus and John, in which the latter at first refuses to baptize the former (3:14) and only accedes when Jesus persuades him that "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Luke passes over the name of the Baptist in silence and presents Jesus' baptism as something in the past, "when Jesus also had been baptized..." (3:21),

so as to concentrate on the revelation of the Spirit to Jesus while he was praying (21b-22). John omits the baptismal scene (though he refers to it in 1:32-4) and concerns himself with the witness John gave concerning Jesus, of whom he says that he baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:19-28). In short, John is made into a precursor of Jesus (Matt. 3:11ff; Acts 13:24ff).

That Jesus was baptized by John is, then, a historically certain fact. But this is not all. Jesus' relationship with John must have gone much deeper. He must have belonged to John's circle and had probably baptized on his own account. From the historical-religious aspect, Jesus was initiated in and depended on the Baptist's prophetic-eschatological movement. "Let us not in any way imagine that Jesus' relation to John the Baptist was a fleeting one."²⁶ Indications of this deep relationship are Jesus' praise of John as the greatest of the prophets and of those born of woman (Luke 7:26ff; Matt. 11:18ff) and the fact that he withdrew to a solitary place after hearing the news of John's assassination (Matt. 14:3-13). And let us not overlook one important fact: in Mark and Matthew, Jesus begins his own public ministry "after John had been arrested" (Mark 1:14; Matt. 4:12), which can, at least probably, be taken as meaning that John's arrest provided the existential motivation for Jesus to begin his own work, not just that the two were coincidental in time.²⁷

The point of this analysis is that Jesus was to take up the mantle and some of the content of John's preaching in his proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Like the Baptist, Jesus appeared first and foremost as a prophet—though part of his language was taken from apocalyptic—announcing the close arrival of God, destroying the false hopes in Israel's prerogatives, proclaiming God's judgment not only on the gentiles, but also on Israel, rejecting those who trust in their own righteousness, welcoming notorious sinners, opening his preaching to all and not—as the Essenes and Pharisees did—to a separatist remnant. Like John, he offered the possibility of salvation. Neither Jesus nor John, though, offered a salvation connected with the salvific institutions of the Old Testament: the Temple, ritual, sacrifices; they offered something quite different: baptism in John's case, unconditional trust in God in Jesus' case, and true conversion in both.

(c) Jesus' Concept of the Kingdom of God

Jesus put forward his own concept of the Kingdom, as we shall see shortly. First, however, I should like to reflect briefly on the fact that Jesus came *following a tradition of hope for oppressed history*, that the first impression he made was above all *in continuity* with a hope-filled tradition.

The fact of the existence of this tradition is something not much alluded to in christology, even somewhat disdained, since the object seems to be first and foremost to find something specific to Jesus that will show his difference from other human beings so as to emphasize his unrepeatability. That is, we look for those things in Jesus that show him *in discontinuity* with the rest of the human race. Let me say that there is something very strange in this procedure.

To take a simple example: traditional christologies do not pay much attention to the parable of the good Samaritan, nor to the fact that Jesus lived as a good Samaritan, because, on the face of it, the message of this parable could be known independently of Jesus, and there is no need for it be something unique to Jesus. They would rather see Jesus working prodigious miracles impossible to anyone else, or showing a clear and explicit consciousness of his divinity, since this would prove his radical discontinuity from other human beings.

Christologies today do not base themselves on this sort of unrepeatable action peculiar to Jesus, but neither do they tend to give proper weight to what Jesus has in common with others. And if I regard this as a strange way of proceeding, this is why: Jesus' way of revealing the truth about God and human beings is through what is least esoteric and most common—love; and if we are looking for discontinuity, this is to be found not in the “beyond,” but in this very love, a limitless love, valid to the point of the cross.

Whether there are discontinuities between Jesus and the rest of humankind as a matter of historical fact is something that needs examining, but we must also stress the deep significance of the continuity between Jesus and the positive traditions of humanity. To return to the Kingdom of God, we should first attach great importance to the fact that Jesus shared in expectation of the Kingdom, that he thought it possible, that he thought it something good and liberative. This view brings Jesus back to humankind, since humankind,²⁸ not just Israel, has forged these utopic hopes, and this is then an effective way of stating the true *humanity* of Jesus in historical and exegetical categories (as dogma was later to do in ontological categories), since it shows Jesus facing up to the question that has always preoccupied humankind: whether or not there is salvation for oppressed history. And Jesus appears tied into humanity in a specific manner: he is one of those who believe that it is possible to overcome the suffering of history. He belongs, then, to the current of those who hope in history, in the midst of oppression, who again and again formulate a utopia, who believe that justice is possible. And in this way we can say (in faith) that Jesus' humanity is *true* humanity.

In this particular sense, Jesus needs be seen not as the monopoly of Christians, but as belonging to the current of hope—expressed in religious or secular ways—of humanity, as belonging to the current of solidarity with the sufferings of history. And so Jesus himself provides the possibility of a universal, human ecumenism of all those who hope and work for a kingdom. This is why it is so understandable for non-Christians to ask Christians simply to “go back to Jesus.”

Having said this, let us now look at Jesus' specific concept of the Kingdom of God, a specificity that can be enlarged later by examining the addressees of and Jesus' service to the Kingdom.

(i) *The Kingdom of God is at hand.* Just as the Baptist proclaimed the imminent coming of God, so Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is at hand. In the very early words of Mark 9:1, he says: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” In

his parables, he states that the harvest is now ripe (Matt. 9:37 par.), that the fields are white, ready for harvest (John 4:35), that now there is new wine (Mark 2:22), that the hour of the bridegroom has come and there is no need to fast (Mark 2:18-20). He states that if he casts out demons, this means that the Kingdom of God has already come (Matt. 12:28). To the Pharisees' question about when the Kingdom would come, he replies that "in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). In a word, the dawn of salvation has broken, the old times have passed away. "The eschatological hour of God, the victory of God, the consummation of the world is close. And indeed: very close."²⁹ And if at the end of his life Jesus did not see the closeness of this Kingdom quite so clearly, nor that it would come in the way he had envisaged, he nevertheless reiterated at the Last Supper his conviction that it will come: "I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). This banquet will be the final banquet at which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be seated at table and to which will come pagans from the four points of the compass (Luke 13:28ff).

These words must have caused quite a stir. Jesus not only hopes for the Kingdom of God, he affirms that it is at hand, that its arrival is imminent, that the Kingdom should be not only an object of hope, but of certainty.³⁰ In systematic language, Jesus has the audacity to proclaim the outcome of the drama of salvation, the overcoming, at last, of the anti-Kingdom, the unequivocally saving coming of God. And the signs that accompanied his words upheld this hope.

(ii) *The Kingdom is purely God's initiative, gift and grace.* Jesus states that the Kingdom is a gift and purely a gift from God, that it cannot be forced by human action. The coming of the Kingdom is, then, shot through with gratuitousness; God comes out of gratuitous love, not in response to human actions.

This gratuitousness, however, is not opposed to human striving. The "growth parables" underline the fact that that the Kingdom of God and its final coming do not depend on human action, but neither is the growth a form of magic. I shall deal with the relation between gratuitousness and human action later, but for the moment let me just say that they are not opposed to one another, as is often supposed. Jesus himself, proclaiming the free gift of the Kingdom, does not draw a lesson of inactivity toward it, but rather carries out a whole series of actions related to the Kingdom. Whether he does so *because* the Kingdom is coming—and so he can show these signs—or *in order that* the Kingdom may come—and so its coming depends on his actions—cannot be elucidated by pure theory, since, existentially, the two aspects are united in Jesus; the main thing is the fact itself: Jesus actively served the Kingdom. And he obviously did not tolerate the anti-Kingdom, the situation of injustice, denouncing it with great force, even while thinking that it was not going to last long.³¹

And the same applies to those who heard him. The coming of the Kingdom demands a conversion, *metanoia*, which—to put it simply for the moment—is a task for the listener: the hope the poor must come to feel, the radical change of

conduct required of the oppressors, the demands made on all to live a life worthy of the Kingdom.³²

Gratuitousness and action are not opposed, then. The coming of the Kingdom of God is something that, on the one hand, can only be asked for, not forced; but on the other, the will of God has to be put into effect now on this earth. What is clear is the absolute loving initiative of God, which is neither forced nor can be forced—this being both unnecessary and impossible—by human actions. Clear too is that this gratuitous love of God's is what generates the need and the possibility of a loving human response. When a sinner is converted, it is God's goodness and mercy that moves the sinner to change. "The mercy of God we experience . . . is the precondition, the basis and the foundation of the merciful behavior that ought to obtain among us."³³ In the words of 1 John, "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (4:11). The gratuitous love of God both shows us what loving one another means and enables us to put it into practice.

God's gift is not opposed to human activity, or, more precisely, is opposed to only one thing: this activity being understood in a Promethean sense, being capable of causing or forcing God's action. What Jesus is rejecting, then, in affirming the Kingdom as gift, is that—as the Essenes, Pharisees and various armed movements claimed, in their various ways—we either can or should force the coming of the Kingdom. It comes purely from God's love. On this level, indeed, the only thing we can do is simply pray, as Jesus taught: "Your Kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2)

(iii) *The Kingdom of God as eu-aggelion, good news.* The coming of the Kingdom of God—in the understanding of the traditions preceding Jesus—means crisis for and judgment on the world and history. Jesus was no tranquilizer of consciences distancing himself from the Baptist. He shared his idea of judgment and, probably, expected the coming of the Son of Man at that time (see the apocalyptic discourse of Mark 13 par.). Nevertheless, this is not the most specific and original aspect of the proclamation of the Kingdom. Unlike the Baptist, what is imminent is not God's judgment—though this will come—but God's grace. And this is what Jesus expresses in a term not found in John the Baptist: *eu-aggelion*, the good news.

Jesus states that the coming of God's Kingdom is good and the ultimate good. Jesus, like the Baptist, requires conversion when he announces the coming of the Kingdom (Mark 1:14; Matt. 4:17), and later demands radical conversion. But, in itself, the coming of the Kingdom is, above all else, good news, as Matthew and Luke spell out: "The good news of the Kingdom of God." This is the vital core of Jesus' message: God is coming close; God is coming close because God is good, and it is good for us that God should come close. In Rahner's systematic language, God has broken for once and for all the symmetry of being possibly savior or possibly condemning judge. God is seen, in essence, as salvation, and God's approach is directly salvation.

Let us look briefly at the term *eu-aggelion* and how it relates to the Kingdom of

God. It appears frequently in the New Testament, and with a variety of meanings.³⁴ In the Synoptics, it is a central term and again has a variety of meanings. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, when the evangelist himself is speaking, the term "good news" can refer either to Jesus himself or to what Jesus brings (1:1). But in other passages, where *eu-aggelion* is put into Jesus' mouth, it is used in a strict sense (8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9) and it appears once as "the good news from God" (1:14). For Mark, then, the good news is what Jesus brings from God, though Jesus' person, life and destiny also form part of the good news.

In Matthew, *eu-aggelion* means "the good news of the Kingdom" (4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Luke avoids the use of *eu-aggelion* as a noun throughout his Gospel and it appears only twice in Acts: once on its own (15:7) and once qualified as "the good news of God's grace" (20:24). On the other hand he—and Q—make liberal use of the verb "evangelize" (ten times in the Gospel and fifteen in Acts), in the sense of "bring the good news to." In Luke and in Q, therefore, the word *eu-aggelion* is referred back to its meaning in Isaiah (61:1-3; 42:1-4; 51:16; 52:7; 59:21), "in whom the concepts of 'eschatological prophet' and 'bringing the good news to the poor' are tied one to another."³⁵

The conclusion has to be that in the Gospels, Jesus is good news, but, with logical priority, the good news is what Jesus brings: the Kingdom of God. This is naturally so, since there is no way of separating the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaims and the good news Jesus himself brings. But sometimes they are one, even linguistically: the "good news of the Kingdom of God" means the Kingdom of God as good news.

This being so, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is not only something true—this is how things are—but something that in essence has to be proclaimed with joy and must produce joy, as the Gospels also attest. And this, let me say in passing, imposes certain conditions on how it is proclaimed today and enables us to verify whether it has in fact been proclaimed. To proclaim something to be believed which, also, turns out to be good news, is not the same as directly to proclaim good news which is, also, true. And one way of verifying whether what has been proclaimed is good news is to check that it produces joy, since it would be a strict contradiction to proclaim it without producing joy. The joy of those who proclaim it and those who receive it is an essential condition of the proclamation at issue being good news, something frequently forgotten in the mission of the church, which is often more concerned with communicating a "truth" that has to be given and received in an orthodox manner, without bothering to present it with joy and to check whether or not it has produced joy.

In short, for the Kingdom of God to be *eu-aggelion* means that it must make its hearers rejoice. As Leonardo Boff has written, "Jesus articulates a radical aspect of human nature, its hope-principle and its utopic dimension. And he promises that it will now not be *utopia*, the object of anxious awaiting (cf Luke 3:14), but *topia*, an object of joy for all the people (cf Luke 2:9)."³⁶ Or, in the words of Raúl Aguirre, "Jesus gave religious expression to the actual situation of the immense majority of the Jewish people in the first century. The God of the Kingdom expresses the real

hope of a people in great material difficulties, subjected to a cultural and political crisis of identity. This is why Jesus aroused undoubted popular support throughout the whole of his ministry."³⁷

3. The Way of the Addressee: the Kingdom of God is for the Poor

I have already mentioned the subject of the "addressee" as one way of finding out what this Kingdom might consist of. The following logical consideration is relevant here: if the Kingdom of God is "good news," its recipients will help fundamentally in clarifying its content, since good news is something essentially relational, not all good news being so in equal measure for everyone.

In order to grasp what it means for the Kingdom of God to have specific addressees and so to be essentially partial, we need to remember that Jesus offered God's love to all, but not in the same way.³⁸ Certainly, Jesus did not come in the sectarian guise of his time, offering salvation only to those belonging to a particular group (Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots and the like), nor did he adopt a primarily antagonistic stance. He came rather as a positive evangelizer, concerned for the salvation of all and willing the Kingdom of God to be brought within the reach of all. As Schillebeeckx says, "Jesus' praxis and activity never had an anti, but a pro character."³⁹

This, however, does not prevent Jesus from having a specific addressee in mind when proclaiming the Kingdom of God. All that can be deduced from it is that he did not exclude anyone from the possibility of entering into the Kingdom. But not excluding does not mean the same as addressing himself directly to certain people. And these are the poor.

(a) *The Poor as Addressees of the Kingdom of God*

In order to analyze who the addressees of the Kingdom of God are, let us start with this impressive quotation from Joachim Jeremias: "By ascertaining that Jesus proclaimed the dawn of the consummation of the world, we have not yet completely described his preaching of the *basileia*. On the contrary, we have not yet mentioned its essential feature... the offer of salvation Jesus makes to the poor.... The Kingdom belongs *uniquely to the poor*."⁴⁰ Jesus indeed understood his mission as directed to the poor: "... he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). This is shown too by his jubilant response to those sent by John: "the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22; Matt. 11:5). The first of his beatitudes, in Luke's version, proclaims: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20). These statements are basic for understanding what the Kingdom of God is for Jesus. They stand not in the line of discontinuity—as his audacity in stating that the Kingdom is at hand might—but in that of continuity, being rooted in the Old Testament. Yet, as Jeremias understands, they are the basic element for introducing us to the content of the Kingdom of God.

This relationship between the Kingdom of God and the poor is established in the Gospels as a fact, but more basically it appears as a relationship as of right, based

on the very reality of God as this was shown in the Old Testament. This is what Jeremias means by that "*uniquely*." And this is impressively borne out by Puebla: by the mere fact of being poor, whatever the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves, God defends them and loves them, and they are the first ones to whom Jesus' mission is directed (cf. 1142).

This statement is still fundamental and is still, in my view, the touchstone for understanding the Kingdom of God, Jesus and the church's mission today. It is often diluted by taking as poor—and spiritualizing them—the poor mentioned in Matthew 5:3, or nullified by equating poverty with metaphysical limitation, so that all human beings can be included in the category of poor. It is also confusing to recall that poverty has various meanings in the Gospels (as Puebla itself does, 1148ff). The question here is not to deny that the "poor in spirit" or metaphysical "limitation" or different meanings of poverty exist—or that they can exist, and a good thing too—but to know which poor Jesus was thinking of when he said that the Kingdom of God belongs to them. This is the basic question now.

Descriptively—and following Jeremias once more⁴¹—the poor are divided into two classes in the Synoptics. On the one side are those who groan under some type of basic need in the tradition of Isaiah 61:1ff. So the poor are those who hunger and thirst, who go naked, strangers, the sick, those in prison, those who mourn, those weighed down by a real burden (Luke 6:20-21; Matt. 25:25ff). In this sense, the poor are those who live bent (*anawin*) under the weight of a burden—which Jesus often interpreted as oppression—those for whom life and survival is a hard task. In modern parlance, we could call these the *economic* poor, in the sense that the *oikos* (the hearth, the home, the symbol of what is basic and primary in life) is in grave danger, and that they are thereby denied the minimum of life.

On the other side, the poor are those despised by the ruling society, those considered sinners, the publicans, the prostitutes (Mark 2:16; Matt. 11:19; 21:23; Luke 15:1ff), the simple-minded, the little ones, the least (Matt. 11:25; Mark 9:36ff; Matt. 10:42; 18:10-14; 25:40-45), those who carry out despised tasks (Matt. 12:31; Luke 18:11). In this sense, the poor are the marginalized, those "whose religious ignorance and moral behavior closed, in the conviction of the time, the gate leading to salvation for them."⁴² These could be called the *sociological* poor, in the sense that being a *socium* (the symbol of basic interhuman relationships) is denied them, and with this, the minimum of dignity.

So the Gospels do not provide an absolutely clear-cut image of the poor Jesus was thinking of as addressees of the Kingdom, nor of course a strictly conceptual reflection designed to answer the questions we ask now about the meaning of poverty.⁴³ But neither can they be said to lack a basic vision of what the poor meant to Jesus. The poor are those who are at the bottom of the heap in history and those who are oppressed by society and cast out from it; they are not, therefore, all human beings, but those at the bottom, and being at the bottom in this sense means being oppressed by those on top. Both economic poverty and lack of moral dignity can

express this being at the bottom. From a purely conceptual point of view, the two can be separated (Zacchaeus suffered the social shunning, but not the economic poverty), but both senses of being poor usually go together and converge in history, as happens today in the Third World. The poor are those close to the slow death poverty brings, those for whom surviving is a heavy burden and their chief task, and those who are also deprived of social dignity and sometimes also of religious dignity for not complying with church legislation. The poor are those who in Latin America are usually called the "popular majorities."

To these poor, Jesus showed undoubted partiality, so that what is now called the option for the poor can be said to start with him (though it goes back before him to the prophets, and indeed to God himself): partiality toward the economic poor, as shown in the beatitudes in Luke, and partiality toward the sociological poor, as shown in his standing up for publicans and sinners expressed with even more force, perhaps, than the former, precisely because their alienation on religious grounds was more provocative to him.⁴⁴

Having said this, let me briefly characterize the poor as a social grouping at the time of Jesus, in order to shed light on the present discussion on what they mean, now that we are all asked to make a preferential option for the poor, and to show, above all, what the Kingdom of God meant for Jesus.

In the first place, one must stress that the Synoptics speak of *the poor in the plural*, not of poor individuals or the sum total of poor individuals, but of a reality—be it understood as a group or a class—that is collective and massive and sufficiently defined in historical terms. "The poor," in the plural, are spoken of in the beatitudes; "crowds" of the sick in the summaries; and the "multitudes" who listened to Jesus are often mentioned.

Looking at these groups or collectivity of poor in more detail,⁴⁵ the first thing to note is that they are *economically-sociologically* poor. The New Testament Greek word most frequently used to describe them is *ptochos* (from the verb *ptosso*, to crouch or bend down). It appears twenty-five times, and in twenty-two cases "refers to the economically afflicted and dispossessed."⁴⁶ In the other three cases, where it means spiritually poor (Matt. 3:5; cf. Gal. 4:9; Rev. 3:17), there is always some qualification added. And in the three places where Jesus relates the Kingdom of God to the *ptochoi* (Matt. 11:5 = Luke 7:22; Luke 4:18 and 6:20), the meaning is not spiritual. The conclusion is that for the New Testament and for Jesus "the term 'poor' is a sociological category, even in the three texts that mention good news to the poor."⁴⁷

The second thing to note is that these are *dialectically* poor. In the Gospels, poor and rich are spoken of as different and contrasted groups. The New Testament does not in fact express this with the clarity and force of the Old. The contrast is rather between poor and envious. But even if it is not as explicit, this does not mean that the Old Testament context is not pervasive: "behind this understanding of rich and poor the class dialectic of the Old Testament is implicit."⁴⁸ The reversal of fate

awaiting the poor and the rich in the Gospels—see the *Magnificat*—“has no meaning except that the understanding of poverty as a state of unjust oppression remains in force in the New Testament.”⁴⁹

It is, then to *these* poor that Jesus says the Kingdom of God belongs: those for whom the basic things of life are so hard to achieve, those who live despised and outcast, who live under oppression, who, in short, have nothing to look forward to; those who, furthermore, feel themselves cut off from God, since religious society forces them to introject this understanding—it is these whom Jesus tells to have hope, that God is not like their oppressors have made them think, that the end of their misfortunes is at hand, that the Kingdom of God is coming and is for them.

These poor are the majority, which is quantitatively important in itself, but important also for understanding the universality of the Kingdom of God, something to which liberation theology seems to have called attention. It is at least careless, if not hypocritical, to stress its universality—as a means of rejecting its partiality—since there is little universal about a universality that fails to take the majorities of this world into account. And the quality of these majorities also indicates that the Kingdom can come to be a universal reality: if life comes even to these—to whom it never has come—then one can indeed speak of the universality of the Kingdom of God.

If the poor, understood in this way, are those to whom the Kingdom is addressed, then it is from them that we can better understand what sort of Kingdom Jesus was thinking of. It is a strictly partial Kingdom and one whose minimum, but basic, content is the life and dignity of the poor.

(b) The Partiality of the Kingdom of God

As an eschatological reality, the Kingdom of God is universal, and open to all, though not to all in the same way. But the Kingdom is addressed directly only to the poor. And this being so, it is essentially “partial.” This statement, so clear in the Bible, yet so difficult of acceptance—look at the interminable debates over the present “option for the poor,” which had to be qualified into “preferential” so as to make the option less radical—has its roots in the Old Testament, which treats this partiality as something essential. While we so often use arguments from the Old Testament in order to understand Jesus, we now need to look briefly at the partiality that runs through it, in order to understand Jesus and the Kingdom he proclaimed.⁵⁰

The founding event of the Old Testament, the exodus, shows God being partial to an oppressed people, revealing himself to them, not to all, liberating them, not everyone. And this partiality is a basic mediation of God’s self-revelation. It is not that God reveals himself first as he is and then shows himself partial to the oppressed. It is rather *in and through* his partiality toward the oppressed that God reveals his own identity. And this pattern persists through the whole of the Old Testament. “Father of orphans and protector of widows...,” God is defined as in Psalm 68:5. In the prophets God calls not the whole of Israel, but the oppressed

within it "my" people.³¹ Yahweh is defender of Israel, the *Go'el*, "because he defends the poor,"³² and will go on being Israel's God to the extent that Israel defends them. H. Wolf finds the true *confessio Dei* in this exclamation: "In you the orphan finds compassion."³³

The partiality of the Kingdom of God should not, therefore, surprise us. If Jesus apocalyptically stresses its eschatological character and imminent coming, he prophetically emphasizes the partiality of God as God of the poor. And this partiality of God, in terms of the Kingdom too, is present in the Old Testament. The "king awaited"—utopia—is not just any king, but the king who is partial to the oppressed. "The king's justice... does not consist primordially in pronouncing an impartial verdict, but in the protection given to the poor, to widows and orphans."³⁴ This was the way utopia was expressed in terms of kingship in Israel and the surrounding peoples: imparting justice "partially." The same is found in the language of the "awaited righteous judge": "Historically, when the idea of a righteous judge or what was later called a judge came into being, this was exclusively to help those who, being weak, were unable to defend themselves; the others had no need of him.... When the Bible speaks of Yahweh as 'judge' or the judgment exercised by Yahweh, it is thinking precisely of the meaning attached to the root *spt*: saving the oppressed from injustice."³⁵

The internal logic of this partiality will be analyzed later in the context of the contrast between the God of life and the idols of death, which will show that partiality is not just arbitrary choice, but actively defending the poor because they are poor, and will also explain why Jesus was persecuted. Here I simply want to establish the fact and the difficulty—today as in the past—we have in accepting it. It is worth remembering that Jesus ends his reply to John's disciples, in which he sets out the signs of the Kingdom and the preaching of the good news to the poor, with the words "and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Matt. 11:6; Luke 7:23). How could good news offend? The reason lay in the fact that the relationship between God and humankind was being seen from the moral standpoint of the latter. For the Kingdom of God to come for the just had its own inner logic; that it should come without taking account of individual moral states was a scandal. The proclamation of good news to the poor simply because they were poor shook the very foundations of religion, and was the best way of showing God's gratuitousness in a world that idolized riches. "Therefore, the scandal derives from the good news and not primarily from Jesus' call to penance."³⁶ The offense taken by the non-poor is an indirect but effective proof of the fact that the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor simply because they are poor, and that God is revealed as essentially on the side of the poor simply because they are poor.

God's taking sides in this way seems to me to be a constant element of revelation. It is clearly shown by the choice God makes in support of some as opposed to and against others. The partiality that runs through the scriptures is therefore also a dialectical partiality. However obvious, we need to consider seriously how often

scripture states what God and Jesus are against in order to show what they are for. This produces the frequent typification of two types of groups or persons: some accepted by God and others rejected by God.

In the Old Testament, Abel is opposed to Cain, Moses to the Pharaoh, the leaders of the Jewish people to the poor majorities. In the New Testament, the *Magnificat* contrasts the lowly with the powerful; Jesus contrasts the poor, those who hunger and thirst, with the rich, who laugh and have their fill; children with the wise; sinners with just; publicans and prostitutes with Pharisees and scribes and so on. We need to analyze exegetically what Jesus means in each of these cases, but not fail to see the wood for the trees in so doing. Jesus had a clear understanding of taking sides, and of not being accepted because of this, as the parables show. I shall examine these later, but for the moment let us just recall how Jesus formulated his partiality in effective terms: "The last shall be first."

(c) The Kingdom of God as a Kingdom of Basic Life

The poor are, to repeat, those for whom life is a heavy burden on the basic level of survival and living with a minimum of dignity. From Latin America, this is very clear: the poor are "those who die before their time," as Gustavo Gutiérrez constantly says. If the Kingdom of God is for the poor, then, it has to be in essence a Kingdom of life, and so Jesus sees it. According to Jeremias, the situation of the poor—even linguistically—was compared to death. "The situation of such persons, according to the thinking of the time, could no longer be called life. They are practically dead."³⁷ In this terminology, the proclamation of the Kingdom has to be translated: "now those who seemed dead are brought to life."³⁸

In systematic language, Jesus saw poverty as contrary to God's original plan, as annulling it. In poverty, God's creation is vitiated and annihilated. The life that Jesus will bring goes beyond the basic fact of survival, but includes this fact as an essential component. This is what Archbishop Romero said: "We have to defend the little thing that is God's greatest gift: life."

There is no doubt that Jesus made great play of defending the life of the poor in the sense of the primary fact of being alive. For him, the law of Israel was the expression of the primal will of God. He seldom mentions the written Torah in the Gospels, but when he does he presents it as God's final will. And curiously—but logically—he concentrates on its second part, on those commandments that refer to the neighbor and protect life (Mark 10:19 par., see also the antinomies of Matt. 5:21-48). And when he gives examples of keeping the commandments, he always shows a person in a basic situation of needing help to live: parents in need (Mark 10:17; Matt. 15:4: keeping the fourth commandment), the wounded man on the road (Luke 10:30: keeping the commandment to love one's neighbor). Jesus was a nonconformist in respect of the law, even to the point of "criticizing scripture itself."³⁹ But when what is at stake is defending basic life—the most specific requirement of the law—he defends it and requires it without hesitation.

Jesus' purpose to defend basic life comes out more clearly still in his criticism

of the oral interpretation of the law made by the scribes: the *Halaka*. In criticizing these interpretations, Jesus is condemning the creation of human traditions that run counter to the primal will of God on the side of life: cutting off aid to parents in need (Mark 7:8-13; Matt. 15:3-9), forbidding eating corn plucked from someone else's field on the sabbath (Mark 2:23-8 par.).

Finally, Jesus gives central importance to the basic symbol of life: food and bread. He eats with publicans (Mark 2:15-17), a symbolic gesture that cannot be reduced to pure eating, but which includes it. He takes little account of ritual washing before meals (Mark 7:2-5; Matt. 15:2), the former being human institutions and the latter the divine will. He multiplies loaves to show—whatever the christological or liturgical intention behind the account might be—that the hungry must be fed, and the account explicitly tells that they ate and were filled (Mark 6:30-44 par.; 8:1-10; Matt. 15:32-9). At the last judgment those who have fed the hungry have found God (Matt. 25:35, 40).

Jesus also teaches us to ask for bread in the prayer that is most specifically his, a prayer on which Matthew and Luke coincide, though Luke presents only four of the petitions (Matt. 6:11; Luke 11:3). The meaning of *epiousion* is debated and may be either "what is necessary for everyday life" or "what is to come, what is tomorrow's." But even if one holds to the second sense on linguistic grounds, "it would be a crass error to suppose that this meant spiritualizing the asking for bread."⁶⁰ The bread of life and earthly bread are not opposed to each other. What people should ask is that the bread of life should come today, in the midst of their poor existence.

The passages cited above about life, meals and bread are not literarily related in the Gospels to those dealing with the Kingdom of God and the poor, but they are objectively related. They show Jesus' vision of God's creation—"and God saw that it was good"—as holding the prime place, and the primal evil of the anti-Kingdom consisting, precisely, in vitiating this creation, in producing poor. The Kingdom of God must, then, include as its least what is the greatest for the poor: life. For those who, today as well as yesterday, have life assured, this will hardly seem utopia, but for the poor it is.

In my view, of all the ways in which human beings can be divided up, the most basic is this: those who can take life and survival for granted, and those who cannot take precisely this for granted. For the former, the proclamation of life is not good news in itself, and they therefore tend to express the good news as fullness of life or, in religious language, as eschatological life. But it is good news—and very good—in itself for the latter, though their life too should not be limited to survival.

This distinction, on the basis of life, has great hermeneutical repercussions for understanding the reality of the poor in the time of Jesus. Here I must quote the following passage by G. M. Soares Prabhu, dealing with whether Jesus saw the poor in material or spiritual terms:

Western exegesis, which forms part of the vast ideological production of an

opulent and intensely consumerist society based on principles diametrically opposed to those of Jesus, has inclined to the latter interpretation and has systematically tried to spiritualize the gospel understanding of the poor. . . . This tendency to spiritualize the poor and the beatitudes, which crosses all denominational boundaries and makes exegetes agree on this point when they would agree on hardly anything else, is a good indication of the degree to which exegetical currents are in fact determined by the spirit of the age.⁶¹

For the poor who cannot take life for granted, there is nothing esoteric or mysterious in the Kingdom of God providing this minimum. Nor is there for God, since this means the minimum of God's creation becoming reality. We no doubt need to speak of the eschatological fulfillment, but without forgetting the protology of creation; we need to speak of life in its fullness, but without forgetting life in its bare essentials. To appeal to the mystery and the maximum while devaluing the basic and minimum supposes a mistaken understanding of the God of Jesus. "The will of God is no mystery, at least insofar as it affects our neighbor and refers to love. The creator who comes into conflict with his creation is a false God."⁶² The Kingdom of God cannot be opposed to God's creation, then, although the former reaches beyond the latter; it is in creation that a Kingdom of God that is good news for the poor has to begin.

(d) Making the Good News Real

As we know, the meaning of good news in Luke derives from Isaiah 61:1-2, which he follows in the passage where Jesus begins his public life (Luke 4:16-30). The importance Luke gives to the scene (and to what he relates immediately after) is undeniable: he places Jesus' visit to Nazareth at the outset of his public life, changing the place in which he appears later in Mark 6:1-6 and Matthew 13:53-8, and making it into a central passage. His account tells of Jesus' prophetic anointing (vv 18ff), the definition of his mission as evangelization (vv 18, 43), the content of his mission as the good news (v 18c) of the Kingdom of God (v 43), the urgency of proclaiming this (v 43) and the fact that it is now coming about (v 21). But the centre of the scene is held by verse 18b: "He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Bearing in mind his dependence on Isaiah and the retouches Luke makes to the text, we can draw two important conclusions. The first is that the liberation of which Jesus speaks in Luke includes liberation from material want. Far from spiritualizing Isaiah, Luke reinforces his realism. So he replaces "to bind up the brokenhearted" (Isa. 61:1c) with "to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18e, which in Isaiah is 58:6). He also leaves out the second line of Isaiah 61:2, "a day of vengeance of our God," to finish dramatically with the proclamation of the Lord's year of grace, "thereby presenting salvation as the jubilee year in which slaves are set free."⁶³ And this is the first important conclusion: the religious content of the new law includes "material liberation from any type of oppression, fruit of of injustice."⁶⁴

The second conclusion is something I should like to stress more. Common sense tells us that proclaiming good news to *the poor* of this world cannot be a matter of words alone, since they have had more than enough of these. Good realities are what the poor need and hope for. And this is what “bringing good news” means in both Isaiah and Luke: “It will only be *good* news to the extent that it brings about the liberation of the oppressed.”⁶⁵

I am not trying to use the concept “bringing good news” as a premise for a speculative deduction of the need for Jesus then to carry out a certain practice, but both common sense and the meaning of the phrase in Luke do require this. And this is the subject of the next section.

4. The Way of the Practice of Jesus

I am using the word “practice” in its broad sense here, referring to Jesus’ various activities, leaving till later the question of what his “praxis” in the stricter sense might have been. Through this practice, we are trying to establish what the Kingdom of God meant for him, but we first need to make an important previous—and polemical—observation.

In general, all theologies today accept that the Kingdom is a reality to which we have to respond in hope, so that if we were not beings who hope, we simply could not understand it. But, in strict logic, this hope could be mere expectation of the coming of the Kingdom without doing anything practical about it—an attitude that seems to sum up some christologies—or it can be hope accompanied by action to bring it about. It is therefore important to establish which kind of hope Jesus had and generated, whether purely expecting or acting, whether Jesus thought the Kingdom would come gratuitously, in which case all human beings could do was to pray for it to come, or whether he required his listeners to do something.

Let us pose a hypothetical question: If Jesus thought the Kingdom would come soon and gratuitously, why did he do anything? Why did he not simply accept the situation of his world if it was soon to be changed with the coming of the Kingdom? These purely logical questions can only be answered historically. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom and did many things related to the Kingdom. This is shown programmatically in the Synoptics where their accounts of the beginning of his public mission describe him not only *proclaiming* the Kingdom, but carrying out related *activities*. “And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons” (Mark 1:39); “and he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons” (Mark 1:34; Matt. 8:14; Luke 4:40ff). And the summary in Acts 10:38 describes how Jesus “went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.” The Gospels, then, speak clearly and at the outset of both “sayings” and “actions” of Jesus, as Vatican II says. In *kingdom* terminology, we can say that Jesus is both *proclaimer* and *initiator* of the Kingdom of God.

For hermeneutics this means that *kingdom* is not only a “meaning” concept—meaning hope—but also a “praxic” one, implying putting its meaning into practice:

that is, the need for a practice to initiate it, and thereby generating a better understanding of what the Kingdom is. (In passing: the act of "making" the Kingdom is the best indicator of the real existence of its counterpart: the anti-Kingdom. This might also explain why some theologies, which speak of the Kingdom and analyze it biblically, effectively silence the reality of the anti-Kingdom.) Here I want to analyze Jesus' practice as a means of establishing what the Kingdom is, specifically his "actions" in working miracles, casting out devils and welcoming sinners, as well as his "words" in parables and his "celebrations."

(a) Miracles: Calls for the Kingdom

From a historical point of view it is quite likely that Jesus soon detached himself from John the Baptist and the practice of baptism to follow his own course of activity through miracles, a contrast set out in his reply to John's disciples: Jesus heals the blind, the deaf, the lame and lepers (Matt. 11:5; Luke 7:22). It is equally brought out in the narrative: "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons... and he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" (Mark 1:32, 34).

There can be no historical doubt that during the first main stage of his ministry Jesus worked miracles, which traditions have multiplied and magnified, and which diminished in number after the so-called "Galilean crisis." And as happens with other aspects central to the historical Jesus, the later New Testament writings hardly mention them. The conclusion to be drawn is that "Jesus carried out healings that astonished his contemporaries."⁶⁷ Nor can there be any doubt of the importance Jesus attributed to his miracles, to the point where he could sum up his activity in these words: "I cast out devils and carry out healings today and tomorrow."

(i) Miracles as liberative signs of the presence of the Kingdom. If miracles are to give some indication of what the Kingdom is, we first have to ask what they are, and to do so, need to avoid two misunderstandings. The first stems from the modern Western conception, which sees the essence of miracle as violating the laws of nature and therefore miracles as an expression of a supranatural power. But this is generally accepted not to be the biblical concept of miracle in the Old Testament. The Jews did not see nature as a closed system, and so miracles were not important for any supranatural element but for their share in the powerful saving action of God. This is why in the Gospel accounts they are never described by the Greek word *teras*, which denotes the extraordinary aspect of an incomprehensible event (in the New Testament it is used only in Hebrews 2:4), nor by *thauma*, which would be the Greek equivalent of our "miracle" (though they do say that the people were amazed and surprised). The terms used are rather *semeia* (signs, by which the happening is attributed to God), *dynameis* (acts of power) and *erga* (works, those carried out by Jesus). Jesus is not, then, shown as a professional thaumaturge like many who were around at the time.

The second misunderstanding consists in rushing in to consider the miracles directly in christological terms as expressing something that sets Jesus apart from other human beings, as if the miracles in themselves could give unequivocal access to the reality of Jesus, in this case to his supranatural powers, to his divinity as it used to be interpreted.

Jesus' miracles relate primarily to the Kingdom of God. They are first of all "signs" of the closeness of the Kingdom. As González Faus has pointed out, they are only signs; that is, they do not bring an overall solution to oppressed reality. They are, however, real signs of the approach of God, and so generate hope of salvation.⁶⁸ In this sense, miracles do not make the Kingdom real as structural transformation of reality, but they are like calls for it, pointing in the direction of what the Kingdom will be when it comes.

These signs occur in a historical context of oppression. The miracles are not, then, only *beneficent* signs, but *liberating* signs too. They take place in a history that plays out the struggle between God and the Evil One, since the Jewish mentality saw diseases, in the broad sense of the term, also as a sign of being under the power of the Evil One. The miracles are—and this is clearest in the casting out of devils—signs against oppression. This means that Jesus' miracles, like all his actions and praxis, should not only be understood from the Kingdom, but also—dialectically—from the anti-Kingdom. So we should stress not only their beneficent aspect *for* someone, but also their liberative aspect *against* someone or *from* something. This is important in understanding why Jesus' miracles generated hope and not just joy. They generated joy for the good they did, but they generated hope because they showed that oppressive forces can be routed. And this makes them, in the strict sense, signs of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus himself attached great importance to his miracles, since they were a sign of the approach of the Kingdom; to refuse them was to refuse the merciful closeness of God. So he bitterly reproached those who refused to see the coming of God in these signs: "if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes" (Matt. 11:21). Closing oneself to his miracles as signs of the Kingdom was like closing oneself to God.

(ii) *The miracles as plural salvations for the poor.* In the Gospels, Jesus cures all sorts of people from diseases, but, as Schillebeeckx so rightly says, "in the miracle tradition we find a memory of Jesus of Nazareth, based on the impression he made above all on the simple country folk of Galilee, who were despised by all religious movements and groups."⁶⁹

In the miracles, the poor saw salvation, and it is from the poor that we have to consider them. This needs to be emphasized not only because the addressee helps to understand the signs of the Kingdom, but also because, after the resurrection, the term *salvation* became absolutized and was presented as an indivisible and eschatological reality, expressed in the singular: *salvation* (from sins). But in the Gospels, salvation is not seen in this way. There are plural salvations in daily life,

depending on specific oppressions. "So, saving means healing, exorcising, pardoning, through actions that affect body and life."⁷⁰

The poor in need of salvation from their endless daily evils understood Jesus' miracles, while the apocalyptic groups who hoped for portentous prodigies as signs of the coming of the Kingdom did not. So in order to understand Jesus' miracles as liberative signs of the Kingdom—and to understand their ongoing significance—we have to put ourselves in the historical setting in which they happened: the world of the poor, since outside this they lose their necessary relationship with preeminent need for day-to-day salvation.

(iii) *The christological dimension of the miracles: Jesus' pity.* The primary christological significance of the miracles is that they show a basic dimension of Jesus: his pity.⁷¹ The miracles not only demonstrate Jesus' powers as healer, whatever they may have been, but mainly his reaction to the sorrows of the poor and weak. The Synoptics keep repeating that Jesus felt compassion and pity for the sorrows of others, particularly the simple people who followed him. "He saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and cured their sick" (Matt. 14:14). He feels pity for a leper (Mark 1:14), for two blind people (Matt. 20:34), for those who had nothing to eat (Mark 6:34; Matt. 9:36), for the widow of Naim whose son had just died (Luke 7:13). And in at least four miracle stories, Jesus heals after someone cries out, "Have mercy on me" (Matt. 20:29-30 par.; 15:22; 17:15; Luke 17:13).

This pity is what at once explains and is expressed in Jesus' miracles, and what defines him in basic ways. Jesus appears as someone deeply moved by the suffering of others, reacting to this in a saving way and making this reaction something first and last for him, the criterion governing his whole practice. Jesus sees the suffering of others as something final that can only be reacted to adequately with finality. It is worth recalling that the verb used to describe Jesus' actions in the passages cited is *esplaginizomai*, derived from the noun *esplagion*, which means stomach, bowels, heart, all symbols of what is deepest within a person. The reality of the suffering of others is what affected Jesus most deeply and made him react with finality from the inmost depths of his being.

In this suffering of others, the historical, material, bodily suffering at issue, Jesus saw something ultimate, not merely something penultimate compared to other evils—spiritual ones, sin—which were later to become the ultimate ones. Both are evils and Jesus was to liberate from both, but the *misereor super turbas*, the pity he felt for the poor, unprotected, humiliated crowds, was something foremost and ultimate for him, not to be superseded by anything.

Jesus' pity was not just a feeling, but a reaction—and so action—to the suffering of others, motivated by the mere fact that this suffering was in front of him. Pity is therefore not just another virtue in Jesus, but a basic attitude and practice. This is what the Gospels emphasize and what Jesus himself stresses in Luke by defining the complete man on the basis of pity: the Samaritan "moved with pity" (Luke 10:33), and by defining God himself on the same basis: the father of the prodigal

son "moved with pity" (Luke 15:20). And this is what Jesus demands of all: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

The Gospels show Jesus' pity as something first and last in various ways. He is upset when the healed lepers do not thank him, but his reason for healing them was not to inspire their gratitude, but pity. The father in the parable rejoices at his son's return, but his reason for embracing him is not a subtle tactic to get what he really wants—his son to ask his forgiveness and set his life in order—but pity. The good Samaritan is shown as someone carrying out the basic commandment, but in the parable he is described as acting not to carry out a commandment, but out of pity.

The attitude-practice of pity is not the only thing about Jesus, but it is the first and last. Other activities of his, including those that point to the transformation of society as such, can be understood as stemming from his immense compassion for the sufferings of the poor and afflicted, but it is his pity that provides his ultimate motivation. For Jesus, pity has to do with the ultimate, and therefore with God. It is something theological, not simply ethical. This pity is what the Letter to the Hebrews was to raise to a christological principle by defining Christ (together with his total availability to God) as the man of mercy. And recalling this is still of supreme importance for the work of the church today. The church often carries out "works of mercy," but making pity for the suffering of the world the first and last criterion of its actions, which means not making itself the final criterion, and showing this in readiness to run grave risks in exercising pity, is very unusual. Personally, this is what most impressed me in Archbishop Romero. While deeply a man of the church, he put the suffering of the people before the institution and showed that he really put it first by not avoiding the risks this attitude brought not only to him, in his own death, but also to the institution: serious attacks on church bodies, the destruction of its means of communication (radio station, printing presses, offices), the assassination of its priests and so on.

The permanent value of Jesus' miracles derives from their being expressions of pity: they are powerful signs springing from sorrow at the sufferings of others and, specifically, of the poor people who surrounded him. And this is still valid and absolutely necessary today for understanding miracles both in secularized cultures that do not know what to make of them and in religious cultures where what is truly Christian about them needs disentangling. Jesus "has clearly indicated a valid direction for faith in salvation, that in which mitigation and final suppression of all human misery, of disease, hunger, ignorance, slavery and inhumanity of every sort make up the permanent and most important task for people in relation to their fellows."⁷² But, let us remember, miracles are not just what are now called "works of mercy," beneficent aid; they are at the same time works that arouse hope in the possibility of liberation. And this means that present-day miracles have to be performed in the presence of and against some oppressive power. To illustrate this with a contemporary example, the works of mercy performed by Mother Teresa of Calcutta are praiseworthy because they bring help. But if they do not arouse hope

that it is possible for the Kingdom of God to come—not just that individual wants will be alleviated—and if they produce no sort of conflict, then they cannot be compared to the miracles of Jesus.

(iv) *The faith that heals externally and internally.* Jesus himself, moved to pity as he was, did not work miracles for their own sake; he rather showed himself reluctant to appear as a professional wonder-worker. This is shown by the fact that accounts of miracles are often related to the faith of those who are healed. At times, faith seems to be the required condition for a miracle: “Do not fear, only believe” (Mark 5:36), Jesus tells the synagogue official, whose daughter had just died. And in Nazareth he could work no miracles because of their lack of faith (Mark 5:5ff). At times Jesus first establishes the existence of faith: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic... ‘Stand up, take your mat and go to your home’” (Mark 2: 5, 11).

The most notable aspect, to my mind, however, is Jesus’ repeated saying: “Your faith has made you whole” (Mark 5:34 par.; 10:52 par.; cf Matt. 9:28ff; Luke 17:19; Mark 5:36 par.; Matt. 8:13; 15:28), radicalized and elevated to a thesis in that other saying: “all things can be done for the one who believes” (Mark 9:23). What is meant here by “faith,” which strictly speaking is neither a condition nor a result of the miracle, but what brings it about?

Certainly this “faith” has nothing to do with accepting doctrinal truths, nor even with confessing Jesus as the Christ. Faith here seems to have to do with God and in a very precise sense. It is accepting with deep conviction that God is good to the weak and that this goodness can and must triumph over evil. This faith is not historically evident, so its achievement is conversion, a radical change in one’s very understanding of God, and so Jesus relates the proclamation of the coming of God’s Kingdom to conversion, to accepting that it is both possible and good news for God to come close.

This faith has its own power. Through it, human beings are themselves transformed and empowered. This is why Jesus can make the scandalous assertion that “your faith has made you whole” without, linguistically at least, formulating it as “God, because of your faith, has saved you.” Anyone who comes to make the basic act of faith in God’s goodness has changed radically, is possessed of a power differing in kind from any other power, but still an effective power. “The power of faith is the power of good and truth, which is the power of God.”⁷³ So Jesus can declare that for those who believe, “all things can be done” (Mark 9:23, even mountains moved (Mark 11:22ff). Those who believe in this way can be healed externally because they are healed internally.

This faith has to do with Jesus, but it is not so much faith in him as faith through him: Jesus makes faith possible. It is told that a power went out from him—the first indications in the Synoptics of the reality of the Spirit—a power that was contagious, that could change people. Here Schillebeeckx is quite right to say: “The mission of the earthly Jesus was to arouse *unconditional faith in God* among those who, temporarily or permanently, came into contact with him.”⁷⁴ But this needs a

qualification: this faith is in a God who, coming close, makes us believe in new possibilities actively denied to the poor in history. It is a faith that overcomes fatalism. It is faith in the God of the Kingdom opposed to the idols of the anti-Kingdom. This is why it is said that where there was no faith, Jesus could not work miracles (Matt. 12:23ff; 16:1ff; Mark 11:5; Luke 11:29ff).

Theological faith is a gift from God, but from a God who imposes himself victoriously on non-faith, so that believers, now healed, are converted so as to become themselves principles of salvation for themselves. It is here that—as opposed to all miracle-working paternalism—the specificity of Jesus' miracles and the great delicacy of God are to be found: healing by making people heal themselves. Latin American experience provides analogies that can help us to understand this. Archbishop Romero helped the poor and the popular movements a great deal and did many concrete things on their behalf. But the most important thing he did was to give them faith in themselves: "You can, you are." And a peasant from Aguilares put this experience into these simple words: "Before we were not, now we are." This change is fundamental and this is what Jesus' miracles lead to.

(b) Casting out Devils: Victory over the Evil One

The casting out of devils can be considered in the same way as the miracles. Here I want just to deal briefly with what it—more clearly than the miracles—tells us about the dimension of struggle and triumph over the anti-Kingdom implicit in the coming of the Kingdom of God.

(i) The reality of the Evil One: the ultimate dimension of the anti-Kingdom. The ancient world, the Old Testament and Jesus' age all shared the conviction that the world was peopled by unknown forces that made themselves very present in people's lives and were harmful to them. Their world-view was impregnated and even dominated by demonology. Especially in Jesus' time, "an extraordinarily intense terror of demons ruled."⁷⁶ These forces acted above all through illness and especially through mental illness, to the point where demons possessed their victims really and totally. Disease and mental illness were not merely an evil whose elimination was beneficial, but a slavery from which people needed to be liberated.

Jesus made his appearance in this world enslaved by demons. Generally speaking, the New Testament shares this world-view, though it also radicalizes and transforms it. It radicalizes it by bringing all the different maleficent forces together as the Evil One, thereby giving this figure a universal dimension. While Judaism knew individual demons, Jesus stressed the unity of them all in Satan. The evil at work is therefore not the isolated actions of individual devils, but something that permeates everything. It is the negative power of creation, which destroys it and makes it capable of destroying, the power that was expressed in history and society as the anti-Kingdom. Jesus also states that evil has great power and knows that people feel helpless and impotent in the face of it. (To illustrate this from Latin America again: we not only have numberless calamities, but also this feeling of

helplessness and powerlessness. The poor often feel helpless and powerless in the face of sickness—much in the manner of the Gospel narratives—but they feel so most in the face of historical calamities, which they not only suffer, but which are imposed on them in their total powerlessness and despair. From this point of view and to express their helplessness and powerlessness, I have proposed the following definition of the poor: “The poor are those who have all the powers of this world against them: oligarchies, governments, armed forces, party politics and, sometimes, churches and cultural institutions.” The deepest impact of liberation theology, I believe, lies in helping the poor to overcome this feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, to believe that liberation from oppressive forces is possible.) Furthermore, the power of evil has not yet reached its zenith: it will be set up as a god (Mark 13:14). And this culminating point is eschatologized: at the end of time it will show its full power, which magnifies the formal parallelism between Kingdom and anti-Kingdom.

On the other hand, however, Jesus transforms the demonological world-view by stating that these powers, stronger than human beings, are not higher than God or stronger than God, but the reverse. Slavery to the Evil One is not the final human destiny; liberation is possible. Jesus himself “comes with the authority of God, not only to carry out mercy, but also, and foremost, to engage in the struggle against the Evil One.”⁷⁷ Jesus’ practice is the answer to the pressing questions of simple people on the possibility of overcoming the Evil One.

(ii) *The casting out of devils and the characteristics of the anti-Kingdom.* As a historical fact there can be no doubt that Jesus cast out devils. But just as he did not appear as a professional wonder-worker, though he worked miracles, so neither did he act as a professional exorcist. Again, analysis of the terms used helps to understand this. The Gospels do not use the common terminology of the time to denote exorcisms: *exordikso* in Greek and *gadasar* in Hebrew, terms that appear in Jewish exorcisms and describe the function of magi and witch-doctors. Instead, Jesus’ actions are described as *ekballo* (to send, expel) or *epitamao* (to warn) the devils.

What Jesus’ actions in this respect show, then, is not the appearance of a great exorcist, but something far more radical. With Jesus there begins the destruction of the Evil One (see Mark 1:24), and thereby the approach of an end to tribulations. In his words, “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matt. 12:28 par.), but it has come because it has the power to conquer the anti-Kingdom. The same can be said of the importance Jesus attached to his disciples’ success in casting out devils (Luke 10:17, 19ff; Mark 3:14ff; 6:7 par.; Matt. 10:8).

Casting out devils, then, is an expression of the approach of the Kingdom, but of a Kingdom with specific characteristics, which appear more clearly in the miracle narratives. Above all, it shows that the Kingdom is coming in the presence of an anti-Kingdom that permeates everything, not that it is starting from a *tabula*

rasa. The coming of the Kingdom is, therefore, not only beneficent but liberating. But it also expresses the fact that Kingdom and anti-Kingdom are formally exclusive, antagonistic realities. In the casting out of devils, this is seen on the level of the *mediators* of Kingdom and anti-Kingdom, Jesus and the devils; the characteristics of this relationship are thereby subjectivized. Through what happens to the mediators, we can learn something of what happens to the *mediation* (Kingdom and anti-Kingdom).

The fact that they are mutually exclusive is shown by the interpretation made of Jesus' own actions: either they come from God or they come from the devils. Jesus himself claims they come from God, since he casts out devils in God's name. His adversaries, however, claim that he operates in the name of the devils, that he himself is possessed (Matt. 12:24; John 7:20) and mad; Mark and John combine both accusations (Mark 3:21; John 19:20). A choice has to be made, then, between Jesus and the devils, which means having to choose between God and the Evil One, and also between what each generates: between the Kingdom and the anti-Kingdom.

The antagonistic dimension—how one acts against the other—is described with crude primitivism in the accounts of casting out devils. The devils resist and struggle, not wanting to be destroyed; that is, they act against Jesus. In these accounts, Jesus is shown as conquering them majestically in the first phase of his public life. But moving from the accounts of casting out devils to more existential passages, such as the temptations, the way Jesus had to struggle against the Evil One is clearly brought out, and, at the end of his life, the Evil One appears to have triumphed over him.

What the casting out of devils sheds light on is, then, the fact that the coming of the Kingdom is anything but peaceful and ingenuous. It happens against the anti-Kingdom and so its coming is a victory. It also clarifies, in an important though stylized fashion, the fact that Jesus' practice is struggle. This will emerge with still greater clarity in his confrontations with his historical adversaries, but here this struggle is raised to a transcendent principle: building the Kingdom implies, of necessity, actively struggling against the anti-Kingdom. And if the latter does not fight back, this means that the former has not truly been built (something always to be borne in mind in outlining and understanding the mission of the church).

(c) Welcoming Sinners: Liberation from Self and from Marginalization

In the Gospels, Jesus is frequently shown dealing with sinners or with those held to be sinners by the religious society of the time. There are also two passages where he is shown granting forgiveness of sins. What concerns us here is how all this relates to understanding the Kingdom of God.

(i) Welcoming sinners or forgiving sins? In many accounts, Jesus appears with sinners. He eats with publicans (Mark 2:15-17 par.), he talks to a woman of ill repute and even allows her to touch him in the Pharisee's house (Luke 7:36-50),

he lodges in the publican Zacchaeus' house (Luke 19:1-10), and talks to the woman of Samaria who has had five husbands (John 4:7-42). However historical each of these incidents may be, they demonstrate Jesus' approach as welcoming sinners, not acting as a harsh judge. This basic attitude of welcome is enlarged on in the parables. We have to go out in search of the sinner to save him (Luke 15:4-19; Matt. 18:12-14), and in the supreme parable of the prodigal son, Jesus shows how God feels toward sinners (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus also defends sinners against those who think themselves just and despise them (Luke 18:9-14), and defines his mission as having come to save not the healthy but the sick (Matt. 9:12; Luke 5:31). Finally, he makes the scandalous assertion that publicans and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of God before the pious people listening to him in the Temple (Matt. 21:31).

In virtually all these passages there is no mention of Jesus forgiving sins; they are a direct demonstration of his tender and affectionate "welcome" to sinners. In two places, however, it is said that Jesus "grants" forgiveness: to the paralytic (Mark 2:10), and to the woman known as a sinner (Luke 7:48), but both these passages are not historical, but redactional, and so from a historical point of view, it is more accurate to speak of Jesus welcoming sinners than forgiving sins. (Mark 2:10 is trying to show that the Christ, confessed also as Son of God, has the power to forgive sins, an attribution not present in the traditions of the Son of Man. Luke 7:48 does no more than illustrate the content of the parable of the just man and the sinner going into the Temple to pray—Luke 18:9-14). This is important for understanding Jesus: just as he does not appear as wonder-worker or professional exorcist, neither does he appear directly as "absolving confessor" of sins. What he does to sinners is much more: he welcomes them. And in this way he proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of God. (In the terminology used here, forgiveness is good for the sinner, naturally, but existentially it does not express the totality and richness of welcome, which is a far better expression of God's initiative and gratuitousness; it includes absolution, but goes beyond it.)

Jesus' welcoming sinners should, then, be seen in the first place as a sign of the coming of the Kingdom and not, directly, as another way of showing Jesus' (divine) power. Like John the Baptist, Jesus recognized the sinfulness of human beings and required all to be converted, but unlike the Baptist, he stressed that the coming of the Kingdom is grace rather than judgment. So the coming of the Kingdom is good news for sinners too. And the fact that sinners cease feeling afraid at God's coming is a sign that the Kingdom is coming into being.

To understand this properly, we need to enquire a little further into who Jesus saw as sinners, although this classification cannot—in my view—be deduced from the words he uses, but from the sum total of his actions. On the one hand, there is the type of sinner whom, in present-day language, we could call "oppressor." Their basic sin consists in oppressing, placing intolerable burdens on others, acting unjustly and so on. On the other hand, there are those who sin "from weakness" or those "legally considered sinners" according to the dominant religious view.

Jesus takes a very different approach to each group. He offers salvation to all, and makes demands of all, but in a very different way. He directly demands a radical conversion of the first group, an active cessation from oppressing. For these, the coming of the Kingdom is above all a radical need to stop being oppressors, although Jesus also offers them the possibility of being saved. (How much success he had in this we are not told, though this is not an idle question for the present mission of the church. In fact the Gospels say very little on the subject. They briefly recount the conversion of Levi and exemplify what the conversion of oppressors implies in the story of Zacchaeus.) Jesus requires a different type of conversion from the second group: acceptance of the fact that God is not like the image they have introjected from their oppressors and the ruling religious culture, but true love; that God comes not to condemn but to save, and that sinners should therefore feel not fear but joy at God's coming.

This is what shows, in deeds, Jesus' welcome to sinners, and what he tells with impressive power in his parables. The God who is coming is a loving God, with more tenderness than a mother, one who seeks to welcome all those who think themselves unworthy to approach because of their sinfulness. This is a God who comes out to meet the sinner, embraces him and prepares a feast. The coming of the Kingdom is truly good news.

This does not mean that Jesus minimizes human sinfulness—though he does show what it basically consists of and distinguishes degrees—but that with the coming of the Kingdom, the tragic uncovering of sinfulness is simultaneously accompanied by welcome and forgiveness. It also means that the reason for Jesus' call to conversion, as distinct from John's, is not the imminence of judgment and fear of punishment, but the incredible goodness of God.

(ii) Welcome as liberation. Acceptance of one's own sinfulness does not now produce anguish or desperation, nor does it block off the future; it is therefore something liberating. If the miracles and the casting out of devils express liberation from physical evil and the power of evil, welcome expresses liberation of sinners from their own inner principle of enslavement. And it does so precisely because it is "grace" rather than "works." If forgiveness-absolution can be understood as what is conceded to sinners for what they do, at least in part, then forgiveness-welcome stresses God's grace and unconditional love. And this love is what achieves what neither pure moral demands, nor threats, nor social stigma can achieve. This is what liberates sinners internally from themselves.

Welcome is liberating also because it gives those despised and cast out by society back their dignity. Joachim Jeremias, commenting on the story of Zacchaeus, has these fine words: "The fact that Jesus wanted to lodge in his house, in the house of this despised man avoided by all, was inconceivable for him. Jesus gave him back his lost honour by staying in his house and breaking bread with him. Jesus granted him communion."⁷⁸ Jesus' gesture of friendship, the fundamentally human sign of "coming close," is what liberates, because in himself Jesus overcomes separation

and opposition. This “coming close” or “allowing others to come close” is a distinctive feature of Jesus: he is shown approaching groups despised in his time: women, children, lepers. And in doing so he gave them back their dignity.

(iii) *The reaction of the anti-Kingdom.* As did his miracles and casting out of devils, so Jesus’ welcoming sinners caused a scandal. His adversaries were indignant at his eating with publicans and sinners (Mark 2:16 par.). Redactionally, this scandal is shown at its most radical when his adversaries are scandalized at his “forgiving” sins: “It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). But the root of the scandal goes still deeper. Jesus, like the Baptist, offers welcome—forgiveness—independently of any cultic formula. God’s forgiveness does not come mediated by any religious institution, there is no need to go up to the Temple and offer sacrifice. And, above all, his welcome to sinners is offered against the criteria sanctioned by religion. God offers himself in grace to those held to be sinners. This is another way of showing God taking sides: Jesus has not come to seek out the just (more accurately, those who considered themselves just), but sinners (more accurately, those held to be sinners). This new image of God is what causes the scandal because it overthrows what is most sacred: fulfillment of the law as what God reacts to with justice. Jesus breaks and finishes with this vision of God and in doing so puts an end to the law of purity in its cultic acceptance.

Jesus also unmasks what lies behind the unjustified scandal: who are true sinners and who are not. The accepted terminology of “just” and “sinners” did more than hide reality; it turned it on its head. This is what Jesus is saying in the parable of the two men who went up to the Temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14), told to “some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (v. 9). The apparently virtuous man did not go home at rights with God; the apparent sinner did. It is not actually said that the publican did not have his own sins, but degrees of sin are established and the basic sin pointed out: self-sufficiency before God—not accepting being welcomed by God—and despising everyone else. It can also be interpreted as saying that those who sin through weakness, let us call it, are by nature better disposed to being open to God’s welcome. This same lesson appears, though in a different form, in the parable of the prodigal son, which is outwardly a story about two types of person. The older brother, though objectively the virtuous one, has not known God; the younger brother, the sinner, has let himself be welcomed by God and in doing so has come to know God.

The partiality and gratuitousness of God are what cause the scandal, because they upset official religious society, but they are also Jesus’ way of saying that the Kingdom of God is coming as good news. Wherever sinners allow themselves to be welcomed by God, there the signs of the coming of the Kingdom are apparent.

(iv) *God’s delicacy:* “Your faith has saved you.” Finally, there is the fact that the expression analyzed in dealing with miracles reappears in Luke 7:50. In the story,

Jesus tells the sinful woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Again, Jesus' welcome-forgiveness does not end up as something extrinsic to the person concerned. God saves from within. The power with which the Kingdom approaches is a recreative power, not a magical one. This shows the supreme delicacy of God, who seeks to transform everything, body and heart, providing the strength for human beings to transform themselves. This then becomes a true transformation, intrinsic to each person, who will not fall back into dependency. Those welcomed and healed should be grateful for the gift—and Jesus complains when they are not—but they do not remain as it were enslaved to the giver. This is what is expressed by the supremely delicate "Your faith has saved you."

(d) The Parables of the Kingdom

Working miracles, casting out devils and welcoming sinners make up what Vatican II calls the "deeds" of Jesus. To these we need to add the "sayings," his practice of the word. The basic aspect of this is the very announcement of the coming of the Kingdom, to which Jesus added many other sayings: teachings, demands, prayers, apocalyptic discourses.... I propose here to concentrate on the parables, since they clarify important elements of the Kingdom of God.

(i) The parables as challenging and polemical accounts of the Kingdom. Jesus' parables have an undeniable historical core, even if in their present form they may be transformed by the early Christian communities.⁷⁹ So images originally used to explain the Kingdom of God have been applied later to Jesus himself (the bridegroom, the king, the merchant, the thief). Sometimes the imminent coming of the Kingdom is reinterpreted as a crisis caused by the postponement of the parousia (the parables of the thief in the night, the master returning late to his house, the lord who comes back from a long journey). Some parables have shifted the accent from the eschatological to the parenetic, the norms of daily life. Finally, there has been a reinterpretation of the audience to whom the parables were addressed; so parables originally addressed to the crowd are applied to the disciples, parables addressed to the leaders of Israel or Jesus' enemies are later redirected to the leaders of the Christian communities. These shifts, however, do not obscure the original meaning of the parables as parables of the Kingdom. Their purpose is to clarify what this Kingdom is, but in a very precise way stemming from the literary form of parable.⁸⁰

Parables are stories based on events from daily life, but in order to understand them properly one needs to note, first, that they speak of the Kingdom without defining it. Jesus never says, "The Kingdom of God is a man who sowed seed or a shepherd who had a hundred sheep..." but "with the Kingdom of God it is like a man sowing good seed...."

Second, the content of these stories is such that interpreting the event related is an open question requiring, of its nature, its hearers to take a particular stance. They

have to draw their own conclusions. Does it really mean that we should pay those who come late the same amount as those who have borne the heat of the whole day? Did the return of the prodigal son really merit a feast rather than the constancy of the elder son? "The parable does not force judgment: the listener is faced with two possibilities"⁸¹ —to accept or not that the Kingdom is like this and not like that. It is then a story whose ultimate meaning is left in suspense until the listener decides; it does not allow for neutrality, but requires decision.

Thirdly, their specific content makes the parables challenging and polemical. This is implicit in their content: the Kingdom of God is not as the listeners expect, and it is also very often made explicit by their context: Jesus addresses the Jewish leaders, his adversaries. The same polemic that goes with his practice (and the controversies and condemnations we shall examine later) appears in the parables too. So Juan Luis Segundo calls the parables a means of de-ideologizing and conscientizing, not merely the preaching of a master of universal morality.⁸²

(ii) *The central message: the fact that the Kingdom of God is for the poor.* The parables reproduce Jesus' basic message about the Kingdom in a different literary form. So they proclaim its imminence (the fig tree, Mark 13:28ff par.) and its novelty (the new cloth and the new wine, Mark 2:21ff par.). But their central message is the same as that proclaimed by Jesus' practice: the Kingdom of God is coming for the poor and outcast; it is partial, and therefore causes scandal.

The parables reproduce this central message; what changes is the audience, and therefore the presentation. It was the poor themselves who listened to the beatitudes, and Jesus ate with sinners; the parables, on the other hand, are addressed directly to Jesus' adversaries, those who criticize his partiality to the poor and sinners. So in the parable of the lost sheep and the lost drachma, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining that, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2); the parable of the Pharisee and the publican going up to the Temple is addressed to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (Luke 18:9); the parable of the two brothers sent out to work by their father is addressed to the high priests and elders (Matt 21:23).

To this audience, Jesus repeats his central message: the Kingdom of God is for the poor, the weak and despised—though here he does it speaking of "God" rather than "the Kingdom of God". He tells his adversaries that God takes sides, is rich in mercy, tender and loving to the poor and little ones. The basic message is that this is what God is like and so the poor and sinners can await this God with joy and without fear. So the coming of the Kingdom is truly good news. This is shown by the parables of the lost sheep and the lost drachma (Luke 15:4-7; Matt. 18:12-14), the generous vineyard owner (Matt. 20:1-15), the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14), the debtors (Luke 7:41-3) and, above all, the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), which Segundo calls the parable of the joy of God, the one that truly tells us who God is.⁸³

What Jesus is doing with these parables is sallying forth to defend the poor and

justify his own partial actions on their behalf. Jesus upholds the partiality of the Kingdom against those who do not accept it or reject it by simply saying "this is what God is like." In the stories he tells, Jesus is trying to convince his adversaries of the tragic situation of the "little ones": they are like a lost sheep, like a son in despair, like a destitute beggar... and hoping for compassion and mercy from them. But whether he succeeds in affecting them or not, he tells them how the heavenly Father reacts to smallness and weakness, how he rejoices when the little ones prosper and accept him as a good and loving Father. This is Jesus' ultimate justification of his practice and of the partiality of the Kingdom. "Such is God, so good. And because God is such, so I too am such, since I work through his command and in his place. Will they complain of the goodness of God? This is simply the justification of the gospel: *Such is God, so good.*"⁸⁴

By means of this supremely positive message, Jesus unmasks the hypocrisy of his adversaries, and so his parables are strongly critical. He often introduces and contrasts two types of person (two brothers, a Pharisee and a publican, a rich man and a poor man...) and his adversaries tend to identify with one of them: the orthodox one, the "just" one.... Jesus then works a reversal that is also a strong criticism of his audience: the one whom you take to be "just" is not just, and therefore you are not just either. You, he tells them, are like the son who said he would go and work, but did not go (Matt. 21:28-31). Jesus ends the parable with these terrible words: "I tell you the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

Besides this central message, the parables clarify other elements of the Kingdom of God, particularly its "crisis" aspect. It cannot be that the Kingdom approaches and everything stays the same; time presses and something must be done. So Jesus warns his listeners not to be like those who do not respond to the children in the street (Matt. 11: 16-19; Luke 7:31-5), or like the barren fig tree (Luke 13:7), which will be cut down and cast into the fire, or like the man who sleeps and is robbed (Matt. 24:43ff; Luke 12:39ff), or like the foolish rich man who dreams of great harvests while the Lord is calling him to account that very night (Luke 12:16-21).

These parables of crisis, though with variants between Matthew and Luke, are addressed to the crowds, but some are expressly addressed to Jesus' adversaries, the rulers of the people. The warnings in these are extremely harsh. The *scribes* are told the parables of the nobleman going to be appointed king (Luke 19:12-27), the trusted servant (Matt. 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-6), the talents (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27), the porter who should be awake waiting for his master's return (Mark 13:33-7; Luke 12:35-8). The conclusion is clear: faced with the imminent coming of the Kingdom they must put their talents to work; otherwise when the Lord comes he will put them from him and send them to share the fate of the hypocrites (Matt. 24:51). The *Pharisees* are reproached for their actions and warned that they will incur God's wrath, since they are blind guides (Matt. 15:14), see the speck in another's eye and not the beam in their own (Matt. 7:3-5; Luke 6:4 1ff), are bandits and robbers instead of shepherds (John 10: 6-21). *Jerusalem*, which killed the

prophets, is given the parable of the hen and chicks (Matt. 23:27; Luke 13:34). The whole of *Israel* is compared to a fig tree that does not produce fruit (Luke 13:6-9) and to salt that has lost its taste (Matt. 5:13; Luke 14:34ff; Mark 9:50).

All these parables show that the coming of the Kingdom is also a crisis. They are a jolt to consciences; you have to react in time and not just rely on Israel's status as chosen people. And in two classic parables, Jesus proclaims the basic requirement in the face of the coming Kingdom: you must be merciful to the needy (the good Samaritan, Luke 10:29-37) and do things for them (Matt. 25:36-46). This is the first and last requirement of the Kingdom and everything depends on it, including final salvation.

The parables also generate hope, the certainty that the Kingdom is coming. The parables of contrast (the mustard seed, Mark 4:30-32 par.; the yeast, Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20ff; the sower, Mark 4:3-8 par.; the seed growing by itself, Mark 4:26-9) state that the Kingdom will grow from very small beginnings. But not just that. The Kingdom is already active, and we must put all our trust in that. This is based on the very reality of the good God, as featured in the parable of the unscrupulous judge (Luke 18:2-8) and that of the importunate friend (Luke 11:5-8). If these can be made to give what is asked of them, how much more will our Father in heaven give. "Take God seriously! He works miracles and his mercy to his own is the most certain thing there is," Jeremias comments.⁸⁵

Finally, there are a few parables that express the joy produced by the Kingdom of God because it is good news. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matt. 13: 44-6) speak of the happiness produced by the Kingdom of God. God's happiness, shown in the parables of welcoming little ones, is matched by the happiness of those who find the Kingdom. And this is what these parables actually speak of, not directly—as they are usually interpreted—of ascetic willingness to give up everything. The latter derives from the former, not the other way round. "The good news of the coming of the Kingdom subdues, produces great happiness, directs life to the consummation of the divine community, brings about the most passionate bestowal."⁸⁶ And this leads to the final consideration in this chapter: the joy produced by the Kingdom.

(e) The Celebration of the Coming of the Kingdom

The coming of the Kingdom is good news, and is therefore incompatible with sadness. More, the Kingdom of God has to be celebrated with joy, since it would be a strange sort of good news if it did not. (And this joy is basic today for verifying the true faith of the true church. Obviously the Kingdom of God imposes hard conditions and building it involves suffering. But a church shot through with sadness, one that did not show and communicate joy, would not be a church of the *eu-aggelion*. A sad church is a sorry church, and this is the impression some of the mainstream churches give, even though they possess ample means, long tradition and great prestige within the universal church.) And this is what Jesus shows.

Besides proclaiming and embodying the Kingdom, Jesus celebrates it, especially

in the form of meals. In the Gospels, meals are spoken of in the parables, in the miracles and in the multiplication of loaves. But Jesus also accorded them special importance in his own life: he ate with sinners and despised categories of people (Mark 2:15 par.; Luke 7:36-47), and, at the end of his life, said farewell to his friends at a supper (Mark 14:12-25 par.). After his resurrection, several of his appearances are also told in the form of meals (Luke 24:29-31; John 21:12ff; cf. Acts 10:41).

The importance accorded to meals as celebrative signs is present in all cultures, including that of the Old Testament, in which it becomes a sign of all the promises of the Kingdom of God:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
 a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
 of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
 And he will destroy on this mountain
 the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
 the sheet that is spread over all nations,
 he will swallow up death for ever.
 Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
 and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
 for the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 25:6-8)

In this context, Jesus' meals are signs of the coming of the Kingdom and of the realization of his ideals: liberation, peace, universal communion. And all this not only has to be asked for and worked for, it also has to be celebrated. This—ultimate—communion of the whole human race is what needs celebrating because it produces joy; and therefore rather than "meal" in its purely nutritive sense, the terminology used is that of a feast, a wedding banquet. This is the happiness of the Kingdom: "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (Luke 14:15).

As the Kingdom is also celebrated against the anti-Kingdom, however, Jesus attaches great importance to the presence at the table of those whom the anti-Kingdom habitually keeps from it. So he sits at table with publicans, with sinners and prostitutes. His parables stress that in the Kingdom those who are never invited will partake of the banquet: "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:21), people from the streets, "both good and bad" (Matt. 22:1-10). And this is also why—as I have said throughout this chapter—Jesus' meals are not only beneficent celebrative signs, but also liberative ones: those who for centuries have been prevented from eating together can now eat together. This is why Jesus eats with the poor and despised.

The tragedy is, once more, that the anti-Kingdom reacts. Instead of the sign being one of joy for everyone, including Jesus' enemies, they deeply distort the happiness of eating together and and accuse Jesus of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19). And they are most

scandalized by the fact that he eats with publicans and sinners. Jesus counters their hypocrisy with the ironic comment that it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick (Mark 2:17) and backs this up with an Old Testament reference: that God desires justice, not sacrifice (Hos. 6:6, cited in Matt. 9:13, in the story of the meal with the publican Levi; cf. Matt 12:7). And he gives them a severe warning: the gentiles will sit at the table of the Kingdom of God and many of the Jews will be excluded from it (Matt. 8:11ff).

The trouble with his enemies is that they are absolutely blind to the Kingdom of God. It is the very fact that the poor sit at table that forms the great joy of God, and this is what we have to celebrate on this earth. So, if those who do not weep with those who mourn find conversion hard, it will be much harder for those who do not rejoice with those who do. If God's joy and the joy of little ones cannot move their hearts of stone, they will never have hearts of flesh and will have understood nothing of the Kingdom of God.

This joy is what Jesus communicates. He tells the parables of God's happiness with joy, he enjoys himself with the little ones, and it is with joy that he utters one of the very few prayers whose words have come down to us: "It was then that, filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, he said: 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children'" (Luke 10:21; Matt. 11:25—JB).

Celebration of the Kingdom of God is the great sign that something of it has already arrived. Let me end this chapter by saying that this is still true in Latin America. This is a challenging and even scandalous fact for those outside, but of great importance to the poor themselves. The poor are experts in sufferings without end, but many of them do not give way to sadness. They have the capacity to celebrate what beneficent and liberative signs there are. And they celebrate it in community, like Jesus, around a table. The shared table is still the great sign of the Kingdom of God. This is what Fr Rutilio Grande SJ said in his famous homily in Apopa, in February 1977, a few weeks before he was assassinated:

God, the Lord, in his plan, gave us a material world, like this material Mass, with the material bread and the material cup we are about to raise in Christ's toast. A common table with a big tablecloth reaching everyone, like this Eucharist. Everyone with a stool, and the table, tablecloth and place settings reaching everyone. Christ, at the age of thirty-three, celebrated a farewell supper with his closest friends and told them this was the great memorial of redemption. A table shared in brotherhood, with a place and a setting for everyone.... It is the love of shared fellowship that breaks and overthrows all types of barrier and prejudice and will overcome hate itself.⁸⁷

Excursus 1

The Kingdom of God in Present-day Christologies

The subject of the previous chapter has been dealt with at some length because of its importance for christology in general. But it is also a fact that liberation theology has made it—for christological, historical and methodological reasons—its main concern; as Ignacio Ellacuría says: “Just what Jesus came to proclaim and bring about, the Kingdom of God, that is, is what should become the unifying object of all Christian theology, moral teaching and pastoral practice: what true followers of Jesus should pursue is the greatest realization of the Kingdom of God in history.”¹ This being the case, we need to analyze how the Kingdom of God is understood today in various christologies and specifically in Latin American christology. Before doing so, let me make two prefatory comments.

The first is that, however strange this may now seem, the discovery of the Kingdom of God as Jesus’ central concern is relatively recent, dating from within the last hundred years. In my view, this discovery is the most important for the church and for theology in many hundreds of years, with consequences that have made themselves felt in all basic theological fields (theo-logy itself, ecclesiology, morals, pastoral teaching), not only in christology.

To demonstrate the importance of this discovery, let us ask this purely hypothetical question: Would the church’s mission, and even faith in Christ and God, be the same if Jesus, even having been raised by the Father and been proclaimed dogmatically as true God and true man, had not proclaimed the Kingdom of God? The answer is obviously No. And the recent history of the church confirms this. There can be no doubt that faith in Christ and the church’s mission are different now—at least in principle—from what they were in previous centuries, and that this change, revolving round the church’s new relation to the world, is seen as an improvement, as a faith and mission more in accordance with Christianity. The theological presuppositions of this change and improvement are based on Vatican II and Medellín, on the Kingdom of God moving the church to turn to the world.

Nevertheless—and this is my second prefatory comment—we must also be conscious of the difficulty of following this discovery through logically. While theoretically the Kingdom of God can be said to have been adequately integrated into christological and ecclesiological thinking, it is no easy matter to keep sight of it as the central element in theory, let alone in practice, since, if it is the most important element, it is also the most demanding and permanently judges faith and the church. Hence the importance of analyzing the actual significance of the Kingdom of God in theology.

1. The Rediscovery of the Kingdom of God as the Ultimate and Eschatological

In the nineteenth century, liberal German theology, for reasons discussed in the previous chapter, launched the famous call “back to Jesus.” This led, on the one hand, to establishing the impossibility of writing a “life of Jesus”; on the other hand, however, analysis uncovered how basic the Kingdom of God was for Jesus. So in 1893 Johann Weiss published his *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (“the first attempt at a consistent eschatological interpretation of the gospel,” according to OCD), and Alfred Loisy coined the famous lapidary phrase: “Jesus came to preach the Kingdom of God, but what he got was the church.” In one way or another, the discovery was made that the decisive thing for Jesus was not himself or the church, but the Kingdom of God. And as a formal characterization of this Kingdom, it was described as the ultimate, the “eschatological.”

(a) *The Ultimate as Crisis of All that is not Ultimate*

A first result of this discovery was to cause a crisis for the contemporary Christian understanding of historical reality and society, since the Kingdom of God, being the ultimate, threw all that was not ultimate into crisis. So what made the greatest impact in the discovery of the Kingdom of God in late nineteenth-century Germany was its dimension of crisis.

Adolf Harnack, for example, the last great exponent of liberal theology, in his famous work *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900, Eng. trans. *The Essence of Christianity*, 1901) had put forward a figure of Jesus based on the paternal goodness of God, love for humankind and the infinite value of the human soul. This image of Jesus undoubtedly had exemplary value, but it also fulfilled a purpose of harmonizing and reconciling the values of nineteenth-century German society: divine justice and human order, throne and altar, religion and culture. Jesus is, then, presented as the one who fully embodies the aspirations of “man,” that is of the bourgeois nineteenth-century citizen, imbued with idealism and an uncritical faith in progress. Society could continue on its chosen path unimpeded by Jesus.

This is the context in which the impact of theologians such as Weiss and Loisy (plus Albert Schweitzer with his brilliant *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (1906, Eng. trans. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1910) has to be understood. Jesus was not a preacher of the universal morality that confirms the ideal essence of humankind.

The Kingdom of God he preached was not an extrapolation of middle-class aspirations, nor the harmonization of faith and history brought about one way or another since Constantine and the advent of Christendom. In more modern terms, it is not the foundation and justification for "civil religion" or "neo-conservatism" in the United States, or for the "national Catholicism" of Franco Spain, or for the "new Christian Europe" now looked for by the Vatican. None of this is the Kingdom of God and it is therefore hopeless to justify it in the name of the Kingdom. But this is not all: the Kingdom of God judges and actually critiques any historical and social structure. It therefore not only expresses the "eschatological reserve"—that society is *not yet* the Kingdom—but also and above all critiques society: it is *certainly* not the Kingdom. (The so-called "eschatological reserve" can be, and sometimes is, used casually by some first world theologies in order to safeguard the truth of eschatology: nothing existing on this earth is yet the fullness of the Kingdom of God. But reading this from the Third World, it has a sarcastic ring, because here the not-yet is blindingly obvious and what obviously needs stressing is the certainly-not. This is why we insist that the Kingdom of God is not only a relativization, but also a very strong criticism of contemporary society.)

Rupture and critique are then the first outcome of the discovery of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it first demands the de-absolutization of what passes for the ultimate, a basic change in our view of reality from faith. In the optimistic bourgeois environment of the last century, the discovery of the Kingdom of God came to say that things could not go on as they were and that they would not get better left to their own inertia and internal development.

(b) Defining the Kingdom as the "Ultimate": the What and When

What is ultimate relativizes and critiques all that is penultimate, as we have seen, but of its nature also introduces the temporal question: when the ultimate comes about. Analyzing replies to this question is important not only or mainly to satisfy curiosity—ever renewed in milleniarism movements—but because the apparently innocent question of *when in time* involves the more important question of *what in fact*. In other words, to know when the Kingdom of God will come, we need to know what it is.

Exegesis has traditionally furnished three replies to the question of when in time. Albert Schweitzer² thought the eschatology of the Synoptics referred to the future and only to the future. Jesus originally believed that the Kingdom would come during his lifetime (Matt. 10:23) and later thought that his death would hasten its coming (Matt. 26:29). The Christian community, disappointed by the non-arrival of the Kingdom, then located it in the future, at the end of time (Mark 13:32). So the Synoptics expressed an eschatology sequential in time: the ultimate would really come at the end. C. H. Dodd³ interpreted the eschatological texts of the Gospels as texts speaking of events occurring in the present (contradicting his contemporary Rudolf Bultmann, who interpreted them in an ethical-existentialist sense). They show the Kingdom not as something still to come, but as something

that has come about in the person and actions of Jesus. We need, then, to speak of a realized eschatology. Finally, Oscar Cullmann⁴ tried to mediate between both positions. Jesus' preaching contains affirmations both about the present and the future concerning the Kingdom. Both are true, but there is a tension between them, and it is this tension that has to be analyzed. His reply is well known: the "already but not yet" of the coming of the Kingdom. With the coming of Jesus, the end of time has *already* begun, the Evil One and sin have *already* been overcome on principle. But what Christ is has *not yet* been revealed, and this will only be done at the end, on the day of judgment.

These authors try to establish exegetically when—in the temporal sense—the New Testament says the Kingdom will come. Their conclusions differ significantly, partly because they differ in the basic presupposition: *what* the Kingdom of God consists of. To give a systematic response today to the question of when the Kingdom will come, we need to clarify what we mean by it. Let us attempt this through two considerations.

(i) *Jesus and Kingdom: mediator and mediation of God.* We must first distinguish between the mediator and the mediation of God. The Kingdom of God, formally speaking, is nothing other than the accomplishment of God's will for this world, which we call *mediation*. This mediation—according to the whole history of the Old Testament and, in general, of humanity—is associated with a person (or group) who proclaims it and initiates it: this we call the *mediator*.

In this sense we can and must say, according to faith, that the definitive, ultimate and eschatological mediator of the Kingdom of God has *already* appeared: Jesus. We need not wait for another—even though before and after Jesus other mediators exist, related to him and authorized by him—which is no more than repeating, in kingdom terminology, the basic christological confession: Christ is *the* mediator. From this standpoint, we can also appreciate Origen's fine definition of Christ as the *autobasileia* of God, the Kingdom of God in person: important words that well describe the finality of the personal mediator of the Kingdom, but dangerous if they equate Christ with the reality of the Kingdom.

God's will for creation is not simply, however, that a definitive mediator should appear, but that human beings, God's creatures, should live in a particular manner, that history and human society should come to be truly after God's heart: in solidarity, peace, justice, reconciliation, openness to the Father.... This reality is the content of the Kingdom of God, what I have called its mediation.

Mediation and mediator are, then, essentially related, but they are not the same thing. There is always a Moses and a promised land, an Archbishop Romero and a dream of justice. Both things, together, express the whole of the will of God, while remaining two distinct things.

(ii) *The signs and the reality of the Kingdom.* We also need to distinguish between the "signs" and the "reality" of the Kingdom. As we saw when analyzing Jesus'

practice, his miracles, casting out of devils, welcoming sinners (and their modern equivalents) are signs of the presence of the Kingdom in history. They are, therefore, of supreme importance since they express something of the reality of the Kingdom, point to the direction this will take in its fullness and arouse the difficult hope that the Kingdom is really possible.

But these *signs* are not fully the *reality* of the Kingdom. The healings have not made the massive reality of sickness disappear, the casting out of devils has not cancelled the omnipresence of the Evil One, the multiplication of loaves still leaves hunger, welcoming sinners still leaves many outcasts, celebratory meals have not done away with sadness....

(iii) *A new understanding of the "already but not yet."* In what sense can one say, then, that the Kingdom of God has either come already or has not yet come, both in Jesus' time and now? We can say that it has come on the level of the mediator and that we do not need to await another eschatological mediator, although this does not exclude, but rather necessarily includes the appearance of new mediators mandated by Jesus. And it has come on the level of signs in the life of Jesus and in subsequent history.

It has not come, however, on the level of the reality of mediation: the world as a whole is not yet conformed to the heart of God, to put it mildly; to a very large extent it is positively contrary to the heart of God. In Paul's terminology there are still—most definitely—principalities and powers. And death—both in its meaning as human destiny and in its meaning as of being the product of historical sin—has still not been overcome, but rides where it will. Only at the end will God be all in all and only at the end will the Kingdom of God have come (1 Cor. 15:28).

This way of understanding the "already but not yet" is important if we are to avoid both despair and theological and ecclesial triumphalism. The first is forbidden by the fact that the mediator has already appeared and that hidden or obvious signs of the Kingdom happen—surprisingly and gladdeningly—in history. The second is forbidden by the cruel reality of history. It is good to proclaim the definitive appearance of the mediator; this should be done in liturgies and doctrines and experienced above all in personal faith and following of Jesus, but none of this should make precisely those who believe in a God "of the Kingdom" forget the tragic reality of history or hasten to intone triumphal canticles just because believers know and await a happy ending. And it would be worse—the most subtle of triumphalisms and the most dangerous root of alienation—to absolutize the real appearance of the mediator as if this alone were what God willed, while relativizing, ignoring or minimizing the magnitude of the anti-Kingdom.

If I might be allowed to use graphic and anthropomorphic language, we must not think that God is absolutely happy because his final plan has been fulfilled: that his Son should appear on the earth. We cannot think that either God or his Son are very happy when they look at the overall state of our world. Since the coming of the Son, God assures us that that he will not repeat what is said in Genesis: "And

the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created . . .'" (Gen. 6:6-7). But neither can it said that God is filled with peace and joy when he looks at his mediation, creation as it is, even though the mediator, the beloved Son, has already come.

2. The Kingdom of God in Modern Christologies

The discovery described above has had a great influence on modern theology since it has confronted it with the need to determine what the ultimate—what we can call the *eschaton*—is theologically, in order to organize and rank the whole of its content on this basis, without relegating its treatment of the ultimate, in the sense of ultimate in time, to the "four last things": death, judgment, hell and heaven.

For hermeneutical reasons, this has also led theology to decide what is historically most important in reality—what we can call the *primacy*. And the relationship between *eschaton* and primacy has been sought within the hermeneutical circle. So human existence and its trust, hope, historical reality—which feature variously in christologies as the primacy in reality—will be placed in relationship to the *kerygma*, the resurrection of Christ or the Kingdom of God—which feature as the theological ultimate, the *eschaton*.

(a) Bultmann: the Eschatologization of the Mediator

Rudolf Bultmann has been a most determined defender of the eschatological nature of the Christian message, but has developed this from the paschal reality of Christ and not from the Kingdom of God. In other words, he has drastically shifted the stress from the mediation to the mediator, and his is therefore a theology that leaves the Kingdom of God out of account. Not that Bultmann is unaware that Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, but neither the historical Jesus nor his message belong to his theology of the New Testament. "The preaching of Jesus does not belong to the presuppositions of the theology of the New Testament and does not form part of it."⁵

The basis of this stance is found partly in exegetical arguments: the Gospels do not lead us to Jesus, but to the faith of the first communities. Mainly, though, it is found in philosophical ones: what really holds the primacy is human existence in need of salvation, understood existentially-individualistically as authentic, open and freed existence, without basic reference to the exteriority of human beings and the transformation of history. Therefore, for Bultmann, neither the life of Jesus nor the Kingdom are central to Christianity.

In view of this, Bultmann's theology might appear to hold little interest for our current discussion. And yet, though he leaves out the Kingdom of God, he provides a most radical account of two dimensions that reappeared in christology with the discovery of the Kingdom: the eschatological and the critical. Bultmann shifts both dimensions to the mediator, but does so most radically:

The New Testament proclaims Jesus Christ as the eschatological event, as the action of God by which he put an end to the ancient world. In the proclamation, the eschatological event is always made present, and increasingly becomes an event in faith. For the believer the old world has come to its end, it is a "new creation in Christ"... he has become someone new and free.⁶

What there is, then, is the *eschatological* event, Jesus Christ. The ultimate is not in the mediation, but in the mediator. And, in turn, the mediator has become the ultimate not as the Jesus of history, but as Christ crucified and raised. This event becomes the ultimate for us by being proclaimed in the *kerygma*. This Christ preached is the one who places listeners under the unavoidable need to understand themselves and live according to an authentic life, life in faith, which allows salvation and the meaning of life to be bestowed by God, or to continue in their inauthentic life, closed in on themselves, destroying the possibilities of their human existence.

The eschatological ultimate is also *critical* of human beings. For the *kerygma* to be able to be salvation, the sinful being must be destroyed. "Those whom the action of God seeks to vivify are first destroyed by this same action."⁷ The "new man" arrives in opposition to the "old man," just as the Kingdom arrives in opposition to the anti-Kingdom.

The eschatological ultimate is, finally, *good news*. There exists the possibility of life in faith by which we accept that the cross of Christ is salvation for sinful humankind and bearer of the possibility of a new life, and that faith in the resurrection is, precisely, believing that the cross is a saving event.

In this vision of Bultmann's, Christianity is really eschatological, but the ultimate comes about purely in our inner subjectivity and has nothing to do with the exteriority of history, although Bultmann also proposes an ethic. The eschatological breaks into history when the *kerygma* is accepted, but any historical or social situation is equally far from or close to it. The ultimate is not measured by the achievement of the Kingdom of God, nor does its coming have anything to do with the final fulfillment of history. For the ultimate to come about depends solely on inner acceptance of the *kerygma*.

Bultmann's eschatology is, therefore, asocial and has nothing to do with building the Kingdom of God; it is also atemporal and has nothing to do with a future that can become fullness. (This also leads to Bultmann's demythologization project and, positively, to his existential reinterpretation of the language of the New Testament. Temporal language—in the end the angels will come from heaven, there will be all sorts of marvels, the dead will rise up and judgment be passed—should be reinterpreted as a way of affirming the finality and profundity of life here and now. Spatial language—humankind is set on earth between heaven and hell—should be reinterpreted as a way of emphasizing the existential alternative with which we are faced.) So his christology does away with the Kingdom of God. It

concentrates on the mediator and the offer of salvation and liberation he brings: coming to be a "new man," triumphing over the "old man."

The limitations and grave dangers of this reduction, from our point of view, are obvious, but, as with any one-sided proposition brilliantly argued, Bultmann sheds some important light, in this case on the mediator. So I should like to end this examination by quoting a text on Jesus Christ in which Bultmann stresses the liberative aspect of Christ for humankind. He asks himself whether it is possible to know God through creation alone and concludes:

Who is this man who can see creation truly as revelation? It would have to be the one for whom the world is no longer an enigma, who complains neither of pain nor need, who feels no anguish in the face of fate or death, who is not tormented by any inner excision. Where is the man who, without Christ, can say, "the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you" (1 Cor. 3:22), who can say, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all things we are more than conquerors" (Rom. 8:35, 37)? Only then will he see creation as the gracious revelation of God.

Such liberated persons are those who have faith in Jesus Christ. The ultimate is their faith, which allows them to live truly open to this world and freed from this world. This is, in turn, possible through the eschatological event of Christ. The mediator, for Bultmann, is truly mediator, since he liberates and saves.

(b) Pannenberg: the Eschatological as Anticipation of the Ultimate Future

Various theologians have reacted against the ahistorical existentialism of Bultmann (and the transcendentalism of Karl Barth), the most notable being Wolfhart Pannenberg. He declared as much in programmatic form: "History is the most embracing horizon of Christian theology."⁹ With this he defends the historical method as the only valid one in theology—against all types of dogmatism and authoritarianism—and, above all, seeks to retrieve the essentially historical dimension of God's revelation. What is eschatological must, then, be sought in history.

(i) The ultimate: Jesus' resurrection as anticipation of the end of history.

Pannenberg sees the *eschaton* in the final future and the primacy of reality in the correlative trust-hope, an inspiration derived from Ernst Bloch, whom he thanks for rescuing the radical concept of eschatology and grasping the power of the future in human life and thought. The eschatological is the future, since only at the end will truth be decided, but also because, as what has not happened, it already shows its strength in the present.

On the basis of this conception of eschatology, Pannenberg interprets the figure of Jesus as an eschatological figure, but in a precise way and one different from

Bultmann. (His conception—justified in scripture—also allows him to reformulate all the major theological realities: understanding the reality of God as future power, understanding God's revelation as what happens at the end of history with anticipatory signs during history, resolving the problem of how to reconcile a creator God in the beginning with human freedom in the present....) For a start, the truth of Jesus' life and the claims he made have to be decided—as the Gospels demand they must be decided—in the future. As this, by definition, has not yet come, Jesus is eschatological, even if he in some way makes the end of history present now. And this is what happened in Jesus' resurrection, understood as anticipation (*prolepsis*) of the universal resurrection of the dead, in which the end of time, the absolute future, is made real. (Pannenberg insists on the fact that Jesus' resurrection is presented in the New Testament as the resurrection not simply of an individual, but of the "first-born." This means that in the New Testament Jesus' resurrection has, in anticipation, the character of the universal resurrection, of the end of time.)

(ii) *The Kingdom of God enables us to live by the future.* The eschatological is linked to what happened to the mediator in the resurrection. But if this is so, we need to ask what meaning Pannenberg gives to the Kingdom of God in his christology. This is not a purely optional question here, since Pannenberg himself is forced to face up to it by his consequent historical method: when he analyzes the life of the historical Jesus he cannot pass over the centrality of the Kingdom for Jesus.

This Kingdom must be said not to have come yet; it is, then, *future*, but necessarily adding that it is *imminent* future, and Pannenberg analyzes it on the basis of its imminent futurity in order to see in what sense it is also something ultimate. To do so, he insists on the effects on the listener of a proclamation of the Kingdom as imminent future: "Jesus has proclaimed the immediate proximity of the Kingdom of God. This message forced believers to abandon their everyday concerns, urged them to be converted to God, since the initiation of the Kingdom meant deciding the salvation or condemnation of each individual."¹⁰ This proclamation of the Kingdom, at once imminent and future, is what enables us to understand it systematically as something ultimate, since it requires and enables us to live by the future, "to go beyond any fulfillment of existence and any presently real or possible security."¹¹ The proclamation of the Kingdom, then, uncovers the true human reality, "the openness of existence to God."¹² So if human beings accept this proclamation, it becomes for them good news and salvation: "Given that salvation consists in fulfilling the specific human determination, in the fullness of openness to God, this means it is already something present for those who long for the proximity of God preached by Jesus."¹³

Pannenberg's reasoning is at once simple and brilliant. The proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom as imminent enables and urges us to face up to the ultimate; but since, though imminent, it is still future, we can relate to the ultimate only by realizing our essential anthropological dimension of openness, in this case through

trust-hope. In this way, living only the Kingdom that is drawing near is to realize our human essence, and so salvation.

Pannenberg sees this systematic reasoning borne out in Jesus' own practice. "His healings provide immediate evidence of the fact that where the message of the proximity of God is accepted entire and in complete trust, salvation as such is already effected."¹⁴ This is also why Jesus forgives sins in disregard to the law. In a word, "trusting in the coming of the reign of God is the only condition for participating in it."¹⁵

This understanding of the Kingdom as the ultimate is based, then, on the primacy given to human openness, trust and hope. Pannenberg then goes on to try to reclaim what is inescapably central in the Gospels: the relationship between the Kingdom and a way of life described generically as love. Those who accept Jesus' message come "to the authentic natural human relationship with God and can no longer live other than 'desiring the Kingdom of God above all,'" which leads them to act as God acts, that is, to a life of service, forgiveness, mercy and love.¹⁷

In this, Pannenberg sees the present significance of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. What matters in the here and now is no longer living by a hope insofar as this hope is imminent, but living by the future of God. In this way, what is not yet—and because it is not yet—already generates a reality in the present: trust, hope, unconditional surrender. In this way, too, Pannenberg puts forward a reinterpretation of Cullmann's solution. The "already but not yet" is not two continuous realities with differing values, in that the "already" is the beginning of a fullness that has "not yet" come about. The realities are rather discontinuous: the future, precisely, because it has not happened, allows a present of salvation to exist.

All this shows that Pannenberg places a positive value on the proclamation of the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus. In the end, however, the resurrection remains the basic factor, even when the ultimate is seen from the Kingdom of God. Asking himself whether the coming of the Kingdom has happened, Pannenberg states that it has, though in a partial and unexpected fashion, in the resurrection of Jesus himself. Put in other words, at present the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection functions as the equivalent of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God made by Jesus: "Jesus' resurrection justifies the hope for what is immediate that guided his life, and for the rest of humankind grounds the hope in the end that has already been accomplished in him."¹⁸

(iii) *The (abstract) socio-historical dimension of the Kingdom of God.* We have so far seen Pannenberg approaching the Kingdom of God from a metaphysical-anthropological standpoint, but in "The Kingdom of God and the Church,"¹⁹ he also deals with its socio-historical dimension. This is worth discussing in itself, but also because it has become a model for an extensive body of theology.

Pannenberg notes that Jesus did not stop at proclaiming the Kingdom, but also demanded the practice of love, as the quintessence of justice, and that this shows a new dimension of the Kingdom, since "justice and love do not concern individuals

alone, but also the structures of social dealings among human beings. In this sense, the Kingdom of God has a markedly political character." He also mentions the utopic dynamic toward justice, which sets the future of the Kingdom in motion, and recalls that the churches must shed light on history from the ideals of the Kingdom, must be prophetic critics of deviations from these, must avoid pulling back from involvement in society and, finally, must avoid triumphalism, since "the power of love is far from being the property or privilege of the churches." Elsewhere, he also recognizes that the Kingdom of God is "a kingdom of contradiction of the established powers."²⁰

These statements are important. They show how discovery of the Kingdom of God has social implications and mark an advance on Bultmann's existentialist individualism. But they are hardly historical, and in this can be dangerous and even deceptive, without of course meaning to be so. Since this way of approaching the socio-historical dimension of the Kingdom has been and still is common in first-world christologies, let me make three basic criticisms.

The first is that Pannenberg, while appreciating the positive forces that stem from the proclamation of the Kingdom, insists on what is called the "eschatological reserve" (*der eschatologische Vorbehalt*), that is, the relativization the fullness of the Kingdom imposes on any historical configuration of reality and society. So he rightly stresses that nothing in history can be the Kingdom of God and reminds us of the dangers of making such an association, since real horrors have been committed in its name. And he stresses that "the authentic declaration that we are not God is still a decisive condition for true humanization."

Having established such a basic truth, however, we need to recall other equally basic truths. Although the Kingdom of God cannot be achieved on this earth, the ideal of the Kingdom serves to measure, on principle, *how much* of the Kingdom there is in particular social developments; it also serves to avoid all such developments appearing infinitely remote from the Kingdom by the standards of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God certainly relativizes them, but it also *grades* them, and this is supremely important. The decisive point is how to measure, on principle, how much of the Kingdom of God exists as a social reality, and this is what many theologies fail to do.

By not analyzing the specific signs of the Kingdom, but subsuming them in "love"—actualized at best in forgiveness and mercy—the particular addressees of these signs are generally passed over, and thereby universalized. Universalizing the addressee means universalizing the content of the Kingdom: love. Then it becomes difficult to "measure" how much there is of *Kingdom*, not just how much goodness, to diagnose its true signs, to grade—not relativize indiscriminately—partial realizations of the Kingdom. In a word, the poor are not usually present in these christologies as an essential determinant of what the Kingdom is. So, although their statements are formally true and even important, they suffer from a lack of evangelical and historical perspective on the present. The contribution that faith and the churches should make, to set the correct signs of the Kingdom and to point

history in the correct direction of the Kingdom, remains excessively vague and is very often hijacked by those who have no interest in seeing this Kingdom become a reality.

My second criticism is that the Kingdom of God is usually analyzed without its essential relationship to the anti-Kingdom. It is not that christologies do not mention sin, oppression and the persecution Jesus suffered, but that they fail to take serious account of the fact that the Kingdom is proclaimed in the presence of and in opposition to the anti-Kingdom. This ignores its dialectical and conflictual dimension and the agonistic nature of human existence stemming precisely from the fact that human beings have to choose between Kingdom and anti-Kingdom. So calls for the churches to propound the Kingdom—substantial in themselves—suffer from ingenuousness, since what really costs, on account of its risk and conflictivity, is the call to struggle against the anti-Kingdom. Let me add that in Pannenberg's own christology, this is coherently linked to his failure to give any socio-historical or theological valuation to Jesus' crucifixion and its causes, since the only thing that seems to concern him about the crucifixion is the fact of Jesus' death as a condition that makes the resurrection possible.

My third criticism is that, overall, Pannenberg's christology is addressed substantively to the individual, no longer in Bultmann's existentialist fashion, but still in the personalist expression of trust and hope: "The only contribution the church can make to society where its place cannot be taken by any other institution, is the personal integration of human life, which it carries out through our confrontation with the deepest mystery of life, with the eternal God and his purposes in the history of humanity."²¹ I am not of course denying that this is a target, even a specific one, for the church and religions, but that a church that lives for the Kingdom of God can reduce its specific contribution to, or concentrate it precipitately on, the purely personal dimension.

In scripture, what corresponds to the Kingdom of God is a whole people, the people of God, within which the individual has to achieve self-realization. And this is still the case even though this realization, being personal, has its own autonomy and its own dynamic and is not mechanically dependent on being a member of a people, and even though individuals cannot delegate all their responsibility in faith, hope and love to the people. It is still true that in scripture it is essential for a person to achieve the trust and hope with which to respond to the Kingdom and to achieve the love with which to serve the Kingdom within a people. This being referred to a people—not just to another, a "thou"—is also essential for self-realization as a person, and, as much in Jesus' time as now, this reference is to a people "of the poor." In this case, personal transcendental hope must also be historicized as "the people's" hope and personal transcendental trust must also be historicized as trust in a God "of the poor."

In short, the vision of the Kingdom in this type of christology does not recognize the "partiality" of the Kingdom, does not stress—sometimes does not even

mention—the anti-Kingdom and does not historicize the transcendental openness of the individual as “people’s” hope and as trust in the God “of the poor.”

(c) *Moltmann: Following the Mediator to build the Mediation*

As for Pannenberg, so too for Jürgen Moltmann, the *eschaton* is the future and the primacy is held by hope. In summary form, “the future as constitutive character” belongs to God;²² the *eschaton* in history is the resurrection of Christ, because it points to the future; correlatively the human being is the being of hope. I do not intend to expand on this here, but to examine how Moltmann differs from Pannenberg’s approach and his original contribution: the ultimate is the *mediator*, in that he must be followed, and the ultimate is also the *mediation*, in that this must be built in history; it is also both together, critiquing and struggling against what is negative in history.

(i) *The ultimate as contradiction of the present: the resurrection of a crucified man.* A fundamental contribution made by Moltmann is his retrieval of the dialectical dimension of reality and, specifically, stressing its aspect of negativity. (In his first major work, *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann is inspired by Ernst Bloch, while his second and more definitive major work, *The Crucified God*, is more influenced by the critical philosophy of the Frankfurt School.) So, the present is not only or principally the “not yet” of fullness, a sort of *tabula rasa* with open possibilities not yet brought about, but is, concretely, poverty, oppression, injustice: in a word, sin. Therefore the present is not only distanced from the future but stands in contradiction to the future hoped for. And therefore, too, the future exercises a critical function with respect to the present and defines itself, in the present, as a power in and against the present.

Equally, the ideal person cannot be thought of as the whole person developed from the possibilities of the present-day person, but as the “new man” who, to become such, has to pass through the critique and negation of the present-day person. His hope is not just the positive realization of personal transcendental openness, but hope against the misery of the present. From this it also follows that hope is related to the future not only “expectantly,” but also “praxically,” operating against the misery in the present: it is, then, praxic hope. And this praxis is directed at the transformation not only of the individual person, but of society as such, since the future is anticipated in history not only in the crisis-transformation of the individual, but in that of society. The ultimate, then, can make itself present in history, but above all as contradiction and overcoming of present reality.

The theological roots of this approach, very different from Pannenberg’s, lie in Moltmann’s theo-logy and christology. The God of the future becomes definitive promise in the resurrection, but in the resurrection of a crucified person; this cross christianizes and concretizes the whole of theology. The fact that the resurrected one is the crucified one means that the hope with which we must respond to the

resurrection is the hope of victims: "that the executioner may not triumph over his victim." The apocalyptic-transcendent aspect of hope is concretized through its prophetic element and so hope is also hope for the historical present and requires transforming praxis.

In this sense, one can say that the eschatological event, the *eschaton*, is the resurrection of Christ for Moltmann as well, but in a very different sense from that of Bultmann or Pannenberg, since it is the resurrection of a crucified man.

(ii) *The ultimate of the mediator: following the one crucified.* The eschatological can happen in history in personal form, since we can live in the presence of the ultimate in history, not only through personal transcendental openness to God, but in the hope and following of the risen crucified one.

Believers are those whose hope is based on the resurrection of a crucified one. This means that Christian hope embraces the scandal of there being a crucified one and a crucified history. It also means that the resurrection—being that of a crucified man—is an expression of justice to victims, not only of an afterlife in the beyond, and this is what Moltmann sees as the final purpose of apocalyptic.

Injustice, overcome in the resurrection, is not just a factor in the cosmic drama, but a real injustice, and as such drags believers back into the present history of poverty and suffering. And it does so in a particular way: "Suffering presupposes love. If we do not love, we do not suffer."²³ In this way the resurrection's promise of plenitude places us "in the time of love," in a "life of solidarity with the oppressed."²⁴

What happened to the mediator in his resurrection draws believers back to their present history, and by trying to live this adequately, eschatologically, they meet the historical fact of the mediator. "Not any life is an occasion for hope, but the life of Jesus is, since he laid the cross and death on himself in love."²⁵

What Moltmann is stating, then, is that it is already possible to live in history eschatologically, realizing at once the present hope in the resurrection of one crucified and the love shown in Jesus' life. In resurrection terminology, we can live now as raised under the conditions of history. In historical terms, we can live now with the love of the crucified Jesus. And this is nothing other than the following of Jesus:

The way and destiny of Jesus Christ are for faith the roots of anticipation, or rather, of the gift anticipated, of the coming Kingdom of human beings in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. The crucified one incarnates the new humanity which corresponds to God in the midst of the conditionings of inhumanity which contradict God.... But it is precisely in this way that human beings are enabled to make these conditionings change, to make the world a better country and abolish external and internal slavery.²⁶

(iii) *The ultimate of mediation: the Kingdom of God for the poor.* A better world and one without slavery: this is the Kingdom of God. Moltmann has developed this

systematically in his book on the church²⁷ (from which quotations in this section are taken) which marks a notable advance on other contemporary first-world theologies by bringing out the partial and community nature of this Kingdom, its addressees the poor and, above all, the presence of the anti-Kingdom. In his analysis, Moltmann decides what the Kingdom of God should be today on the basis of what it was for Jesus.

(a) First, Jesus "announces the good news of the Kingdom to the poor and summons captives to the coming freedom of God. The content of his message is the God who is coming and the liberation of the people." (b) Second, the poor are described realistically: "the poverty alluded to here goes from economic, social and physical poverty to psychic, moral and religious poverty.... The poor are all those who, bodily or spiritually, live on the margins of death and to whom life has given nothing." (c) Third, the poor are described historically and dialectically, in relation to the anti-Kingdom: "all those who suffer violence and injustice without being able to defend themselves from these are poor"; they are, then, the impoverished, the oppressed. "The concept opposed to *poor* is that of *oppressor*, *violent*, those who oppress the poor and reduce them to penury in order to enrich themselves at their expense." (d) Fourth, Jesus offers these poor not only a word, but signs of liberation. The Kingdom of God is therefore something that has to be built. (e) Fifth, it is from this partial standpoint that Jesus' message gains its true universality. The good news is for all, but "it can be heard as good news only by accepting one's own poverty and in communion with the poor... (in) solidarity with the humble and burdened." (f) Sixth, this Kingdom of God is made present in history in community, collective form: "The concrete form taken by the Kingdom of God is the community of the blind who see, the captives who are freed, the poor who are blessed and the sick who are healed. With these the exodus of the whole people begins. They make up the community of the wretched, praising and giving thanks to God here and now."

This Kingdom of God preached in this way by Jesus has value for the present, has become a force determining the present, acting "through the word and faith, promise and hope, prayer and obedience, power and the Spirit." The important thing to note here is that the Kingdom acts, and not only formally, as Pannenberg has it, through being still in the future and requiring and enabling a hope, but because, though future, it has basic concrete content: the putting of Jesus' ideal into actual practice.

Expressed graphically, Moltmann tackles the problem by asking what the present reality of the true church should be. That it should be for the Kingdom is not a problem: this consists in where this true church is made real, "in the community manifested through word and sacrament or in the latent brotherhood of the universal judge hidden in the poor?" His reply is that the church should be present "*there where* Christ is waiting for it, in the little ones, the sick, the imprisoned." So Moltmann historicizes and reformulates the marks of the true church on the basis of its service to the Kingdom and its characteristics. Oneness is achieved as "a communion of believers with the poor"; holiness, above all in "the

signs of its suffering, of its persecution on account of its resistance to the world and its poverty"; catholicity, in taking sides, "through choosing the little ones, while the powerful incur God's judgment"; apostolicity, in that mission which "leads inevitably to conflict, opposition and suffering."

Moltmann, then, takes the Kingdom of God seriously, as the mediation of the ultimate, a reality that has to be both hoped for and built against the anti-Kingdom, in taking sides with the poor and according to the norm laid down by the mediator. In Latin America he has been criticized for his lack of historical specificity, and I shall show later how Latin American christology historicizes the Kingdom of God. But seen from within the history of christology, we must note his major and specific retrieval of the Kingdom of God, in which he has been influenced not only by exegesis, but also, in fact, by the theology of liberation.²⁸

(d) Kasper: the (Abstract-Universal) Kingdom of Love

I propose to finish this brief survey with some comments on the christology of Walter Kasper.²⁹ To determine what this Kingdom is, Kasper briefly addresses the question of its addressees according to the Gospels (pp. 84ff) and on some aspects of Jesus' attitude. Among these he distinguishes, "in the first instance, the forgiveness of sins" with its resultant "rejoicing at having encountered the boundless and unmerited mercy of God" (p. 86). He also deals with the miracles, which show that the "well being" established by the Kingdom of God "is not just a spiritual state, but affects human beings as a whole, including their bodies" (p. 95). With regard to the addressees, Kasper emphasizes, on the one hand, that there is a certain partiality in the Kingdom, since "Jesus proclaims it with the stress on God's love and compassion for sinners" (p. 66), though he hastens to qualify this partiality, which has nothing to do with "what is thought of today as social concern or revolution," since "God is a God of people, people of all sorts" (p. 67). The conclusion he draws in these chapters—analyzing Jesus' activity and message—is the universalization of the Kingdom of God: the salvation of the Kingdom of God consists in the love of God, communicated by God, coming to rule in and through people. Love shows itself as the meaning of being: "[Love] is the wholeness of man and the world" (p. 87). And this Kingdom comes about in every individual:

Everyone can know that love is the ultimate, that it is stronger than death, stronger than hatred and injustice. The news of the coming of the Kingdom of God is therefore a promise about everything that is done in the world out of love. It says that, against all appearances, what is done out of love will endure for ever; that it is the only thing which lasts forever (p. 87).

These words, fine and true in themselves, are disconcerting. Love, meaning, hope and promise are all central realities in the Gospels and in the whole of the New Testament, and they are also realities that bear directly on the Kingdom of God as Jesus preached it. What is disconcerting and disappointing is that they should be

presented—and with such a degree of abstraction—as a result of an inquiry into what the Kingdom of God is in the Gospels. What is here said of the Kingdom could equally be said of Jesus' commandment to love or Paul's hymn to love and hope (1 Cor. 13; Rom. 8:31-9) or love in 1 John. It is not that what he says is not true in itself, clearly, but that he does not see how it helps to clarify the specific and concrete content of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus, and that he gives the impression rather of hiding an important aspect of this. The conclusion is that the Kingdom of God—the symbol of basic wholeness for Jesus and the concept he uses most—becomes practically interchangeable with other theological realities and so loses its specificity.

The reason for this universalizing abstraction of the Kingdom of God is that Kasper does not undertake a serious analysis of whom the Kingdom is for, the poor and their poverty; he rather de-historicizes them, without analyzing the actual conditions under which they lived in Jesus' time—or our own for that matter. This makes him anxious to tell us that “the revolution Jesus brings is the revolution of unrestricted love in a world of egotism and power” (p. 68), and, naturally, that “class-war slogans find no direct support in Jesus” (p. 69).

This biblical analysis of the Kingdom of God is rather superficial in comparison with the authors examined earlier and even shows a certain fear of letting New Testament texts speak for themselves, whatever the results. Above all, it is hermeneutically limited and biased. Apparently, Kasper's limit of understanding the meaning of poverty is set by the metaphysical limitation of all human beings and the more specific limitation of being separated from God by sin. His limit of understanding the meaning of salvation is set by love “in itself”—while it is surely very difficult to know what it consists of—historicized at most as forgiveness.

But there are other poverties that cannot be interchanged with metaphysical limitation and there is another love of God directed not only at the sinner, but at the poor. That the Kingdom of God includes what Kasper says is therefore correct. But he is not correct in reducing it to this, let alone in making it the central element of the Kingdom of God: the good news of God to the poor of this world. To say nothing of the little importance Kasper attaches to the anti-Kingdom, which will be analyzed in the excursus devoted to God and idols.

3. The Kingdom of God in Latin American Christologies

The foregoing survey should have shown how the “ultimate,” the *eschaton*, features in different ways in first-world christologies, depending on what is considered the “primacy” in reality. It should also help to understand, by way of contrast, what is specific to Latin American christology. (I have reviewed only a few; there are others more akin to Latin American christologies. The christological thinking of José Ignacio González Faus, for example, has developed along lines in accordance with Latin American thinking, as can be seen from a comparison of the first edition of his *La humanidad nueva* and the latest, and with his *Acceso a Jesús* [1987] as well as his numerous articles in the *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*.)

Latin American christology follows the main lines of modern theology: naming a theological "ultimate," the *eschaton*, as the organizing and ranking principle of everything else, and naming a "primacy" in reality. In Latin American theology, the primacy is held by "liberation," understood fundamentally as "the liberation of the poor," without reducing the whole of reality to this, but seeing the whole of reality from this point of view. And this primacy has a corresponding *eschaton*, the ultimate and eschatological, the "Kingdom of God." This is not deduced from such and such an explicit affirmation, though these exist, but from the specific task of this theology, from what it is most concerned with and analyzes in greatest detail, from what it relates most often to what its primacy is: the liberation of the poor.

At its outset, Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* gave a clear new emphasis to the eschatological focus of theology (chapter 11), but placing this at the service of its greatest problem: liberation and salvation in history (chapter 9). He concluded that the Kingdom of God is the most appropriate reality for expressing the utopia of liberation, though in this book he did so not from a biblical standpoint, but from that of the teaching of the church, particularly the documents of Vatican II (chapter 12). Since then, christological and ecclesiological studies have all given great importance to the Kingdom of God and have made it the central and final reality *in actu*, or at least something more central and more final than other theological concepts. As we saw at the start of this excursus, this was explicitly stated by Ignacio Ellacuría.

(a) Reasons for making the Kingdom of God the Ultimate

Considering the Kingdom of God as the ultimate in liberation theology is not arbitrary, but due to several convergent reasons. Let us look at these.

(i) Before theology there is the *pre-theological*, and for liberation theology this is the specific reality of the Third World. Now, in this world, the utopia hoped for is not any utopia, but the hope that life, as the primal fact of surviving, the dignity of outcasts and basic solidarity—justice, in a word—may be possible. Therefore, without being naive or anachronistic, there is no doubt that the Third World, much more than the others, presents a historical reality somehow analogous to that in which the very notion of a "Kingdom of God" arose. The *locus theologicus* of this theology, understood here not only as a categorical *ubi*, but also as a substantial *quid*, is therefore akin to the Old and New Testament theological setting of the theology of the Kingdom of God. We are therefore at the pre-theological, but hermeneutically decisive, level on which the *Horizontverschmelzung* (mingling of horizons) takes place; this enables us to understand the biblical notion of the Kingdom of God today, but more importantly, forces us to take it seriously into account.

(ii) Furthermore, still in general terms, liberation theology possesses certain *formal characteristics* that correspond to the "Kingdom of God" more easily than to other theological concepts. It is, in effect, a *historical theology*, with a basic concern to historicize all the transcendental realities of faith. It is a *prophetic*

theology, centrally concerned with denouncing and unmasking historical sin. It is a *praxic* theology, in that it sees itself as the ideological arm of a praxis directed at transforming reality. It is a *people's* theology, which sees in the people—in their double sense of “collectivity” and “oppressed majorities”—the primary targets of its activity, and, in a sense, also the authors of theological activity and certainly the agents of faith. For all this, the Kingdom of God provides advantages not offered by other theological concepts.

Despite accusations of “reductionism” from its detractors, liberation theology sees itself as definitely an all-embracing theology and thinks it can better express this inclusiveness from the Kingdom of God and from liberation. The Kingdom of God offers theology a totality that enables it to be just *theology*, and a specific historical embodiment of this totality that enables theology to be *theology of liberation*. The totality can be formulated generically as “transcendence in history,” and the “Kingdom of God” facilitates this, since the “Kingdom” is history and the “of God” is transcendence. “What this conception of faith from the Kingdom of God does is place God in indissoluble conjunction with history,” overcoming “the (earthly) Kingdom and (celestial) God duality.”³⁰ Liberation theology, then, claims to have found in the Kingdom of God a totality from which it can deal with all theological subjects and also rank them in accordance with their closeness to the ultimate mystery, now formulated as Kingdom of God.³¹

(iii) Looking at the history of theology, liberation theology also holds that by making the Kingdom of God central it is easier to avoid serious practical dangers for theology. To mention just two of these: it overcomes the grave danger of equating the Kingdom with the church, and does so in a precise way. The church, on the one hand, cannot escape from the world, since the Kingdom is world; on the other, neither can it conform to the values of the world, become worldly, since the Kingdom is of God. Taking the Kingdom of God seriously is what enables and forces the church to be of the world but not worldly. And the most important thing is that the Kingdom provides a criterion of verification concrete enough to see if and to what extent this danger is present (something that cannot be seen so clearly if other theological realities are taken as the ultimate).

The second example is that, through what it denies, the Kingdom of God points out the historical malice of the world for what it is, as sinful structure, as anti-Kingdom, and again clearly points to degrees of sin: “It is not that structures can sin, as some claim liberation theologians say, but structures demonstrate and actualize the power of sin and, in this sense, make people sin and make it supremely difficult for them to lead the lives that belong to them as children of God.”³²

(iv) Finally, this theology makes the Kingdom of God central for strictly christological reasons. This means, as we have seen, that it retrieves the historical Jesus and so retrieves and makes central the Kingdom that Jesus preached, while applying it to the historical present, as we shall see.

Before tackling this subject, however, we need to meet a reasonable objection, since analyzing the figure of Jesus necessarily leads to another all-embracing

reality that could feature as the ultimate: his resurrection. However, liberation theology deliberately chooses the Kingdom of God and not the resurrection as "ultimate." Let us see why.

Jesus' resurrection, understood as first-fruits of the universal resurrection, undoubtedly presents major claims for featuring as the ultimate: absolute making whole and salvation, and so absolute liberation. Correlatively, it unleashes a radical hope going beyond and against death, all of which is important and is generally taken up in christologies. But furthermore, Jesus' resurrection can be interpreted—on the basis of exegesis, not just arbitrarily or manipulatively—in such a way that it sums up and sheds light on specific elements important to liberation theology.

So it can be said that Jesus' resurrection is not just the revelation of God's power over nothingness, but the triumph of justice over injustice; that its direct promise is not the universal hope of an afterlife, but a partial hope—which can later be universalized—for the victims of this world, the crucified of history; that it can unleash a radical hope now in history, since if God has shown the power of freeing from death, God will have more power to free from oppression; that it is not only a symbol of individual hope, but also of collective hope, since Jesus' resurrection is presented in its very essence as the resurrection of a "first-born," which must necessarily be followed by the resurrection of many others; that it expresses the importance of the corporeal-material dimension, since, unlike other symbols of afterlife, such as those of Greek and Oriental philosophy, it is the whole human being that is raised; that it can somehow be already experienced in history, historicized therefore, by making its specific power felt in a particular way of acting out the following of Jesus in joy and freedom, realities that both reflect the making whole signified by the resurrection within the limitations of history. The resurrection can express central tenets of faith, such as the final eschatology and the absolute gratuitousness of God, even better than the Kingdom of God.

All this is true and appreciated by liberation theology. Despite this, however, if Jesus' resurrection is to function as the ultimate for a theology of this sort, an immense interpretative effort is clearly needed, which is not necessary if the ultimate is the Kingdom of God. The resurrection of itself possesses great power for expressing the ultimate meaning of history, final utopia and radical hope, but it does not possess so much power for showing how we have to live now in history and guide it toward utopia.

Furthermore, as happens with any symbol of the ultimate one chooses—including that of the Kingdom of God—the resurrection also has its limitations and dangers, not maybe as pure concept, but in practice. There is no need to be shocked by these words, since anything we human beings touch, however good and holy—prayer, the struggle for justice, the very idea of God—is subject to our limitation and concupiscence. So history shows that a precipitate and one-sided penchant for the resurrection can and usually does encourage an individualism without a people, a hope without praxis, an enthusiasm without a following of Jesus: in short, a transcendence without history, a God without a Kingdom. History is witness to this

from New Testament times to our own days: look at the community in Corinth and modern Catholic, Protestant and sectarian charismatics. Liberation theology is particularly sensitive to this danger.

All this has to be understood correctly. Of course I am not saying that Jesus' resurrection is not a central reality for faith and for theology, and liberation theology in fact gives it the greatest importance and uses it as an expression of the ultimate. José Miranda criticizes Marx precisely on the basis of the resurrection, accusing him of not daring to conceive a transformation of reality that goes so far as to include "the resurrection of the dead."³³ All I am trying to say is that Jesus' resurrection is not considered as apt a reality as the Kingdom of God for featuring as the ultimate and organizing and ranking the whole of faith and theology. The resurrection will be very much taken into account, but from within something more all-embracing, the Kingdom of God.

(b) Systematic Characterization of the Kingdom of God

Liberation theology starts from the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus, but applies it historically to the present for the obvious reason that the Kingdom did not come in Jesus' time and the present requires that we set it in history. We are conscious of the risks inherent in doing so, but believe it better to run these risks:

The gospel invites us to creative fantasy and to formulate ideologies born not from an *a priori* magnitude, but from analysis and from the challenges of a situation seen from the standpoint of a liberative project. In this situation, Christians in their faith should not be afraid of taking a concrete decision with the risks of failure this implies, a decision that can be the historically mediated coming of the Kingdom.³⁴

Let us look now at how liberation theology assembles and historicizes the formal elements of the Kingdom as they appear in the Synoptics, a process that distinguishes it from many other present-day theologies of the Kingdom.

(i) The Kingdom of God in the presence of and against the anti-Kingdom. Liberation theology sees it as a basic task to establish, methodologically and systematically and in the first place, the *reality of the anti-Kingdom*, since the present situation of Latin America is not just a not-yet, but a certainly-not, so that the utopia of what the Kingdom might be has to focus first on eradicating the anti-Kingdom. This theology begins, then, with asserting the extremely grave sin of injustice, repression and oppression that denies and opposes utopia. This was a feature of both Medellín and Puebla, as we saw in the previous chapter.

The salvation brought by the Kingdom—though this is not all the Kingdom brings—will, then, be *being saved in history* from the evils of history. What the benefits of the Kingdom might be is determined above all by the actual situation of oppressed human beings and not by an *a priori* decision about what salvation

might mean. "Salvation is always salvation *of* someone, and in that someone, *from* something."³⁵ The salvation brought by the Kingdom comes, therefore, in history. So with Jesus, the content of salvation was dictated by the reality of his listeners, and his actions (miracles, casting out of devils, welcoming sinners) were beneficial because they brought good where there had been specific ills.

These benefits brought by the Kingdom are a direct contradiction of the anti-Kingdom and this makes the Kingdom *liberating*. It not only has to produce benefits, but to liberate from ills. The anti-Kingdom is not just the absence or the not-yet of the Kingdom, but its formal contradiction. Building the Kingdom means destroying the anti-Kingdom; saving human beings means liberating them from their slaveries. This is the liberative aspect of Jesus' actions against oppressors in history (the rich, the scribes, the Pharisees, the rulers) and against the transcendent oppressor, the Evil One.

The coming of the Kingdom stands in *combative relation* to the anti-Kingdom. They are not merely mutually exclusive, but fight against one another, and this is massively evidenced in Latin America: the Kingdom is not being built from a *tabula rasa*, but in opposition to the anti-Kingdom, and the present persecution of those who are mediating the coming of the Kingdom is effective proof of this. This persecution, in its turn, becomes the criterion of whether the Kingdom is actually being built. Those who carry out purely beneficial activities are not persecuted, which means that they have not struggled against the anti-Kingdom, and this, in turn, means that their activities are not, strictly speaking, signs of the Kingdom, since they are not activities like those of Jesus.

Liberation theology, then, finds it absolutely necessary to take the anti-Kingdom into account. In this way it distinguishes itself from other theologies of the Kingdom, does justice both to the gospel and to the situation in Latin America and unmasks ingenuous, superficially attractive and alienating visions of the Kingdom. And, though this may not seem much, it provides a guide to what the Kingdom should be through denial and overcoming of the anti-Kingdom.

(ii) *The Kingdom belongs to the poor.* Liberation theology takes absolutely seriously the question of who the Kingdom is for and reaffirms that it belongs to the poor. This is what it sees in the Synoptics and what it maintains, looking at it historically, for the present. Juan Luis Segundo, after a lengthy analysis of the texts, insists: "The Kingdom of God is not proclaimed to all. It is not preached to all.... The Kingdom is destined for certain groups, it is theirs, it belongs to them. It will be a cause of joy to them alone. And, in accordance with Jesus, the dividing line between joy and sadness that the Kingdom must draw passes between rich and poor."³⁶ The same is implicit in the text from Puebla already quoted (1142): God loves the poor and defends them simply because they are poor, regardless of their personal and moral situation.

This partiality with regard to who the Kingdom is for is still essential in liberation theology. Partiality is maintained because it cannot be any other way in

the cruel world we live in, and let me say quite bluntly that liberation theology's guts are wrenched by the inhumanly poor and cruelly oppressed masses, and in this resides its final argument for partiality, an unprovable but decisive argument, and one that finds its proof in Jesus.

Together with this partiality, another theme being developed at present is what might be called the "analogy of the poor" as addressees "and" as builders of the Kingdom, an analogy that is not pursued—as in other theologies—in order to annul partiality, but to determine in history today—when the Kingdom has not come for the poor—who these are and what they mean for understanding the Kingdom of God. Ignacio Ellacuría made a rigorous analysis of this analogy, and the citations in the following paragraphs are taken from his work.³⁷

The poor are, first of all, those who are materially poor, that is, economically and sociologically poor, the great majority of people living in the Third World. Here liberation theology makes its own the concept of poor in the Synoptics (and distances itself from Marxism, which did not include the poor in this sense as agents of history)³⁸: "This real material nature of poverty cannot be replaced by any spirituality; it is the necessary condition for evangelical poverty, though not its only condition."

In the second place, the poor are those who are impoverished, oppressed. They are then dialectically poor, "being dialectically dispossessed of the fruit of their labor and of labor itself, as of social and political power, by those who have enriched themselves and seized this power by this dispossession."

In the third place, the poor are those who have carried out "a conscious appreciation of the very fact of material poverty, an individual and collective appreciation." This is a first expression of the spirit in which poverty has to be lived, noting that "spirituality is not here a substitute for the material fact, but a crowning of it," and that "being materially rich and spiritually poor is an inassimilable and insuperable contradiction from a Christian point of view."

In the fourth place, the poor are those who turn this conscious appreciation into organizing the people and praxis. This does not imply belonging to a particular party or organization, but does involve "the brute fact that the poor have to organize themselves as the poor to banish this collective and originating sin of the riches-poverty dialectic." Here lies the political significance of the poor, more evident in the Old Testament than in the New, though not totally absent from the latter.³⁹

In the fifth place, the poor are those who live their material situation, their conscious appreciation and their praxis with spirit, with gratuitousness, with hope, with mercy, with fortitude under persecution, with love and the greatest love of giving their lives for liberation. In a brilliant systematic synthesis of the beatitudes according to Matthew and Luke, Ellacuría concludes:

For this reason, even though it may appear a deviation from the literal text, the true translation of poor in spirit is "poor with spirit," that is, those who take up their real poverty in all its immense human and Christian potentiality from the

standpoint of the Kingdom. The material fact of poverty is not enough, just as substituting material poverty by a spiritual intentionality is not enough. We have to incarnate and historicize the spirit of poverty and we have to spiritualize and conscientize the real flesh of poverty.

In this analogy of the poor we must not forget the *analogatum princeps*, the materially poor. The Kingdom of God is directed to them simply because of what they are and they are its direct addressees. What the analogy sheds light on is that—as the Kingdom of God has not yet reached the poor—they are also the principal agents of its building in history. In them lies the indispensable material condition for putting history on the right road to the Kingdom of God, and from this material condition of poverty—in a connatural way not found in other material conditions—arises the spirit to build the Kingdom.

We can participate in various ways in the fullness of the concept of “poor” and this is why we speak of analogy. The theological-systematic ideal is one that embraces all the elements enumerated, but the important thing is that we must share in some of them if speaking of the poor in a Christian sense is to have any meaning. Once again, everything begins with material poverty. The Kingdom is for the poor because they are materially poor; the Kingdom is for the non-poor to the extent that they lower themselves to the poor, defend them and allow themselves to be imbued with the spirit of the poor.

This is also the formal solution to the controversial question of how the non-poor share in the Kingdom. The solution cannot lie in ignoring the material nature of poverty and supposing that there can be a poverty in spirit in and for itself with no relation to material poverty. The spirit of the “poor in spirit” should not be judged by how the non-poor relate to their riches, whether they are attached to them or not, but by how they relate to the real poor. The solution has to be found in the line of lowering themselves to material poverty in the form of real *kenosis*, of real service to and support of the materially poor, of sharing in and taking on the fate of the poor. Here too we find the analogy of how the non-poor become recipients of the Kingdom, but the central and vital element in this is to establish a real relationship with the materially poor and with real poverty.

Finally, the poor have at the present time another decisive significance for understanding the Kingdom of God: their “evangelizing potential” (Puebla, 1147). They become good news for the church (and for the whole of humankind), both because their very condition of poor moves it “to conversion” and by incarnating “in their lives the evangelical values of solidarity, service, simplicity and openness to accepting the gift of God” (*Ibid.*).

This meaning of “poor” is of prime importance and is less evident in the New Testament owing to the expectation of the imminent coming of the Kingdom. Now, twenty centuries later, we say of the poor not only that they are those for whom the Kingdom is meant, as the Synoptics say, that they are not just the builders of the Kingdom, but that they bring good news, that they are an *eu-aggelion*. But they are

not this irrespective of their primary material poverty. The Puebla text speaks of the "poor and oppressed," that is, those who are materially poor, and of the base Christian communities, that is, communities whose members are materially poor. Their potential for bringing about conversion stems from their ability to challenge, that is, from their very materially oppressed existence. Their evangelizing potential stems from the fact that they live out their material poverty in a particular spirit. It is, then, in their material poverty that the appropriate conditions exist for giving rise to the specific kingdom values that the poor offer to all as good news.

(iii) *The historical dimension of the Kingdom.* Liberation theology takes the essentially *historical* dimension of the Kingdom of God most seriously. This means that it does not leave its appearance to the end of history (though its fullness will appear only at the end) but insists on its actual realization in the present of history. The Kingdom of God cannot ever be fully realized in history, since it is utopia; this does not remove it from history, however, but obliges us to make it present through historical mediations and to bring it about at all levels of historical reality; utopia becomes a source of ideologies functioning to configure history.⁴⁰

With this insistence, theology reformulates and corrects the interpretation of the eschatological reserve as purely relativizing, and insists that already in history "we must take account" of the fact that it is truly God who reigns. And because the Kingdom is liberating, account must be taken of this reign at all levels where slavery occurs: physical and mental, personal and social.⁴¹

Liberation theology finds the basic argument for this historicization in Jesus himself, as has been analyzed above. It thereby disproves statements such as those in Rudolf Schnackenburg's classic work: "the salvation proclaimed and promised with the Kingdom of God is a purely religious dimension," and the conclusion he draws: "because of its religious nature, Jesus' message concerning the Kingdom of God has a universal destination."⁴²

In order to distance himself from this type of interpretation and to stress the historicity of the Kingdom, Juan Luis Segundo describes it as a "political" reality,⁴³ since this is what it was objectively for Jesus, too, though he proclaimed it for religious reasons. Its content is still political, not in opposition to the religious dimension, but by differentiation from the purely transcendent or individual dimension.⁴⁴ The religious and political dimensions have really no reason to be mutually exclusive, whether they are seen as different aspects of human existence or, still more so, if they are taken on different levels: that of subjective motivation and that of objective motivation. As history repeatedly shows, religion can be a powerful motivation in politics and the truly religious dimension of the Kingdom of God does no more than reinforce its political dimension, since concepts such as that of the Kingdom "are the more decisive politically the more they are pushed, to put it plainly, by religious motivations."⁴⁵ This is so true that one must beware of political fanaticism especially when it is motivated by a religious message.

Whether one calls it political or simply historical, what liberation theology

stresses is that the Kingdom of God happens in history as this is transformed, since what God seeks to transform is the sum total of history, and it would be a contradiction for God to reign without any transformation being made visible in history.

(iv) *The popular dimension of the Kingdom.* The Kingdom of God is essentially "popular" in character, both in the qualitative sense (the people as the *poor* majorities) and the quantitative sense (the *majorities* being the poor). Liberation theology characterizes it as such because of its historical concern for the liberation of the poor majorities, but also because of its biblical roots.

However forgotten it may be—certainly in practice, though upheld in words—we must remember that, since the Old Testament, God and people have been correlatives, and that, *a fortiori*, Kingdom of God and people of God are correlatives. "There will be a Kingdom of God when there is a people of God and to the extent that there is one; there will be a people of God when there is a Kingdom of God and to the extent that there is one."⁴⁶

The reasons for forgetting this fact lie in the hasty equating of the people of God with the church, as though God's primary relationship were with the latter and not with the former. They also lie in the individualization of the person, as though individual persons acceded directly to God and God to them. For the church to see itself as people of God is correct, and at the present time it is absolutely vital to stress this against the devaluation of the definition being attempted in certain quarters. But this must not make us forget that God's primary election is of the poor of this world, of the majorities God defends and seeks to save, of which the church should be a privileged sign. And that persons as such relate to God is also correct, and we even need to underline the individual dimension of persons in their relationship with God to show what cannot be taken away from such a relationship. But, biblically, persons are such within a people, open to giving to and receiving from the others who make up this people.

Having cleared up these possible misunderstandings, we need to return to the basic proposition: the correlation between Kingdom and people. "The Kingdom of God is for the people and only when the people of God has been formed will we have reached the fullness of the Kingdom."⁴⁷ The first phrase should be obvious from our analysis of the actions of Jesus. Although salvation (the miracles, the welcoming of sinners) is often described as coming to particular persons, we are here dealing with "signs" of the Kingdom pointing to a greater whole. Let us not overlook the fact that the plural is often used: Jesus cures "the multitudes," "the poor" are blessed.... And the ideal of the Kingdom as such, symbolized in Jesus' meals, is a reality for a collectivity, for a people. There is no point in repeating, as is often done, that the Kingdom of God is a kingdom of justice and solidarity if it is not directed at a collectivity. Without people there would be no Kingdom of God, although hypothetically there could be individual salvations and the eventual sum total of them all, a model that has of course been very prominent in the history of the church.

But the ideal of the Kingdom of God is not described as this, but as salvation for a people and as being built up as a people with specific internal relationships within that people.

The second phrase—"only when the people of God has been formed will we have reached the fullness of the Kingdom"—is, properly understood, virtually tautological. To the extent that the true people of God comes into being, so the Kingdom of God is made present. This means that both the definitive Kingdom of God and the definitive people of God are interchangeable formulations of utopia. When humankind becomes a single people and a true people in which relationships of justice and solidarity reign, then the Kingdom of God will have come.

(c) The Systematic Concept of the Kingdom of God

To end this survey, we need to inquire into what is meant systematically by the Kingdom of God. An answer is not easy to put into words, but let me suggest the following definition: the Kingdom of God is the just life of the poor always open to a "more."

(i) The content of the Kingdom of God: the just life of the poor. Our systematic concept should make clear, on account of the primacy given to them in the Old Testament and the Synoptics, and because of their massive presence in the world today, that the poor are those to whom the Kingdom is primarily addressed. That its content should be their "just life" needs some explanation. I say "life" because this is what the historical and utopic dimensions of the Kingdom concentrate on, and I add "just" to show the formally liberative nature of the Kingdom.

I insist on the "life" of the poor as the central nucleus of the Kingdom because, in the Third World, poverty means closeness to death and "life" suggests that with the coming of the Kingdom the poor will no longer be close to death. This produces a reassessment of God's creation, of protology, and in a very precise sense: in the Third World, life does not function as something "given," something that once assured can lead to what is truly human and so the place in which one can talk of the Kingdom of God as wholeness. In the Third World, life is not the "given," but what from time immemorial and still today has to be "put." The Kingdom of God is the eschatological dimension, paradoxically, since it is the protological dimension, God's ideal "least," expressed in God's creation. That life should be "just" expresses first and foremost the aim that life should come to be real in opposition to the anti-Kingdom. It expresses the ways of justice needed to build life. It expresses the relationships of solidarity and dignity in the Kingdom. And it expresses the basic condition for the existence of the Kingdom.

The "just life" relates the systematic concept of the Kingdom with the gospel concept of it. It is the good news for millions of human beings, it is what promotes establishing signs of the Kingdom and what leads to denunciation of the anti-Kingdom. And let me add that making life possible is today what still causes conflict, persecution and death. All of which lends meaning to the formulation that the Kingdom of God is the just life of the poor.

(ii) *The historical transcendence of the Kingdom of God.* "Life" is a reality that is by its very nature always open to a "more"; it is something dynamic that points to a development of itself to fulfill itself on various levels, with new possibilities and new demands. "Life" can therefore point to what is fulfilling and utopic in the Kingdom of God, to what is shot through with historical and theological transcendence. Let me illustrate its historical transcendence in the first place by what I have referred to elsewhere as the "phenomenology of bread," the symbol of life.⁴⁸

The Kingdom of God begins with bread, the prime symbol of life and the overcoming of death. But this bread is always more than bread. Its very reality implies the question of how to get it, which introduces the praxic dimension of human life into bread. And once it has been obtained, the question of how to share it arises spontaneously, so we then have, at the same time, the ethical dimension of bread (the need to share it), its community dimension (bread as shared) and its primary celebratory dimension (eating together at table).

Bread obtained and shared by some immediately becomes a question of bread for others, other groups and other communities, finally bread for a whole people. And this gives rise to the social and political dimension of bread and the question of the liberation of a whole people, which in turn brings a whole host of questions about how to obtain bread for all, through what activities, working ideologies, theologies, ways of being church and so on.

None of this happens mechanically, but at each stage of the reality of bread the need for spirit appears: mercy to stir our hearts at the sight of those without bread, courage to struggle for bread, fortitude to stand firm in the face of conflicts and persecutions, truth to analyze the reasons why there is no bread and to find the best ways of overcoming these. Bread, then, mobilizes all the powers of the human spirit and confronts it above all with the question of whether or not it is capable of loving, of whether or not it is capable of the greatest love. And so, bread brings self-giving, generosity, heroism and even the greatest love of laying down one's own life.

Bread also has its sacramental dimension. So in El Salvador we celebrate the feast of maize, and those who gather to celebrate it not only eat, but sing and recite poems, and this feast begets and expresses community, and produces joy.

The good news of bread moves us to thank God who made it or it can make us ask why God allows there not to be bread and it not to be shared. It moves us to follow the Jesus who multiplied loaves to satisfy hunger or it can make us ask why history forces death on such as he. It can make us ask if there is something more than bread, if there is a bread of the word, necessary and good news, even when there is no material bread, if it is true that at the end of history there will be bread for all and whether it is worth working for it in history, even though at times darkness seems to cover everything, whether the hope that there will be bread is wiser than resignation to the lack of it....

This phenomenology of the "more" involved in bread, however effective this description of it, claims only to show how "life" always develops into "more." This is why liberation theology emphasizes, on the one hand, the historical-material

aspect of the Kingdom of God, the bread that is life and denial of death, and why it has to speak, on the other, of an "integral" liberation. In doing so, it is not merely trying to balance "material" liberation by adding "spiritual" liberation in order to avoid accusations of "reductionism," but is being faithful to the primary material dimension that is life, in which there is always the seed of more life.

By beginning with material bread and not setting limits to the dynamic inherent in bread itself, liberation theology can and must state that the Kingdom of God is the radical overcoming of death and that it is the expression of life and life in abundance:

By being so vivid and massive in Latin America, the historical experience of death—and not just of sorrow—death from hunger and from poverty and death from repression and various forms of violence, shows the huge need for and irreplaceable value of material life in the first place, as primary and basic gift, in which everything else must be rooted, everything else being ultimately development of this primary gift. This life should spread out and fulfill itself by internal growth and in relation to the life of others, always in search of more life and better life.⁴⁹

Historical transcendence, which I have here analyzed on the basis of bread, is, I think, present in all theologies, each of which develops, explicitly or implicitly, phenomenologies analogous to mine, starting from relationship to a "thou" or from concern for one's own salvation or from transcendental experience... in order to unfold the fullness of life. How this "unfolding of life" comes about existentially in and for each person is a highly personal affair. Liberation theology begins methodologically with the primary fact of life, but, in homage and fidelity to life, finds itself in the dynamic of the more. The Kingdom of God has its own historical transcendence. And this is so because bread is always more than bread.

(iii) *The theological transcendence of the Kingdom of God.* This historical transcendence is—or can be—the mediation for the theological transcendence of the Kingdom. Liberation theology states that the Kingdom is really of "God," but insists that, since God is a God "of the Kingdom," God appears in a particular way.

As far as the "content" of God is concerned, if the Kingdom is like this, theology can call God God of life, but, more specifically, God of the life of the poor, God of the life of victims, and this brings back today the basic truths that Jesus expressed about God in his personal relationship with God and in the way he spoke about God in his parables. The flagrant inhumanity to which the poor are subjected manifests the humanity of God in the form of loving self-abasement, tenderness, happiness when the poor cease being so. What we saw when analyzing the parables is still true in stating that God wishes a Kingdom for the poor. Such is God, *so good*.

As far as the "mystery" of God is concerned, the just life of the poor effectively brings us into a God different from the usual God of thought, since the reason for

the Kingdom belonging to the poor is simply that God is like that. God being like that is not what natural, let alone sinful, reason thinks or can think, and the partiality of the Kingdom becomes the historical mediation of what is novel and unthinkable in God. It is a powerful way of affirming the mystery of God. *Such is God*, so good.

I want to insist on the theological transcendence of the Kingdom, because liberation theology is accused of lapsing into reductionism and required to stress the transcendent dimension of the Kingdom of God. I consider this unjust, because this theology does accept the transcendence of God quite naturally. But it is ironic above all because, by making the life of the poor central in the Kingdom, theology magnifies the mystery of God.

A God of the life of the poor is not, in effect, the thought God, and still less so is the God who is so often subject to the power of the anti-Kingdom, so that the greater God appears as the lesser God, a scandal I shall analyze in dealing with the cross of Jesus. As Ignacio Ellacuria succinctly wrote: "God the Father had, or produced, many poor sons, among them his only-begotten Son, his well-beloved, when he became incarnate in history. This is a prime and massive fact, which no one seeking to speak of God can ignore."³⁰ What I want to emphasize now is that while christologies have drawn *theological* consequences from the scandal of Jesus' cross—from St Paul to the christologies of the crucified God—not many of them have drawn the same consequences from the fact of the Kingdom being for the poor. So it is right to be on one's guard not to reduce the Kingdom to the historical dimension and to integrate God into it. But it is wrong not to introduce into the mystery of God the fact that this is a God of a Kingdom of the poor. Then God becomes a lesser God, and this maintains the mystery of God, more so than many declarations of orthodoxy.

This lesser God, however, is ultimately a greater God, the utopia that, from the future, continues to give hope and constantly inspires the building of the Kingdom of just life for the poor. As utopic principle, this God goes on instigating good things for the poor, in history and against history: hope, the struggle for justice, peace, community.... And this God goes on enabling us to combine in history such apparently irreconcilable things as the struggle for justice and work for peace, efficacy and gratuitousness, action and contemplation, activity and spirit.... As long as all this remains a reality, God is being seen to be present in the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is being seen to be "of God." In this way, in the historical dimension, building the Kingdom is walking toward God, till all the principalities—the anti-Kingdom—are overthrown and God is all in all: the definitive Kingdom of God.