


SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD

By JAMES WALSH

NE OF THE MORE thoughtful reactions to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is the criticism, from a protestant, that the Church is too optimistic, too enthusiastic, in her new-found affirmation of the world and its values:

The statement that 'the Church knows that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 21) illustrates a temptation throughout the document to assume that the gospel crowns the natural life of man, rather than being, as well, a challenge to, and judgment upon, that life. The document minimizes the degree to which the gospel is also a scandal and a stumbling block, by which men can be offended as well as uplifted.¹

It is a fact that, though the Church through her long history has striven to uphold the innate goodness of God's creation and the authenticity of man's natural striving for material and social prosperity and peace, the role which she has played in the world during recent centuries has left men, and many christians amongst them, unprepared for the language of *Gaudium et Spes* and the teaching contained in such documents as *Pacem in Terris* and *Populorum Progressio*. The Church is indeed saying that christians have a primary duty to seek the well-being of man in his human kingdom, because she 'is composed of members of the earthly city . . . and goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot as the world'.² Yet in the same document she insists that 'Christ did not give his Church any mission as such in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which he set before her is a religious one'.³ It is only when this mission is accepted by all of her members that she can effectively promote man's search for knowledge, happiness and his true identity.

¹ Robert McAfee Brown: *A Response* (to *Gaudium et Spes*) in *The Documents of Vatican II* (London, 1966), p 315.

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 40.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

It is unlikely that the world of men, to whom *Gaudium et Spes* is addressed,¹ can be persuaded suddenly to reverse the order of their values, to set a premium in their seeking on the things they cannot see or be humanly assured of, unless they have proof that the christians amongst them are seeking wholeheartedly and before all else the kingdom and his justice; and most of all, that christians are not merely travelling hopefully, but staking all they have and are on the prospect of arriving. Only when the world sees christians manifesting in their living that it is more blessed – in the sense of bringing greater happiness here and now – to give than to receive, when it sees them cheerfully renouncing what the world, and they themselves, hold most dear if their search should so demand, and because their present as well as their future joy is bound up with such renunciation: only then will the world begin to believe that the gospel makes any sense. But as long as so many christians hang back or allow themselves to be led astray in their searching, the Church must treat them as they are, christians in name only, or only half-committed. Some she must woo, as she woos the non-christian, by showing how, in so far as this is possible, that all they seek, or imagine they need or want will be added, if only they will struggle clear of sin and selfishness. Only then will they see clearly, in their new-found purity of heart, the object of their search, and seeing, begin to find and to possess.

The sinful man, like the unbeliever, is unable to distinguish in human kind and human living the heavenly from the earthly city; he may know in theory that the two are distinct, but he does not experience in his own life the reality of the difference or the priority of the values – except for the vague feeling that, knowing the better, he sometimes seeks the worse. The right relationship between the earthly and the heavenly, as well as the degree of their compenetration, is known only to a vivid faith, and is obscured by sin.² On the other hand, there are unbelievers who have begun the search, in the manner of their lives, all unbeknownst to themselves: 'I was sought by those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me'.³

In any case, a lively faith and the basic righteousness which faith confers are prerequisites for the search. This the Church has always preached to the whole of human kind, as well as to her own. In the gospel text which gives the title to this article, our Lord is

¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

³ Isai 65, 1.

speaking of the fatherly care and kindness of God our Father: it is precisely because the Father knows that we have need of these other things as the necessities of our human condition that we can rid ourselves of those anxieties which prevent us from going forward in our search. And, as we shall see later on, our search for righteousness will enable us to share God's providential care for those less well-endowed, in any and every sense, than ourselves.

The search is not possible without faith: 'For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him'.¹ This is the foundation of the preaching of the gospel, the starting-point of the search, as well for us as for the first christians. His loving-kindness, his fatherly care and competence is revealed to those who are empowered to receive his Son, whom he sent to share with us his life and likeness. Faith confers a kind of knowledge which is a finding and a permanent possessing: a life. 'This is eternal life, to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent'.² So Paul tells the pagan athenians who seek a god whom they know not, that it is God's will 'that they should seek him, in the hope that they should grasp him and find him'.³ Nor is this search to know God a merely intellectual exercise, an abstract philosophical quest. Consciously or unconsciously, it is a search for God in person – as John's disciples sought him:

The next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and looked at Jesus as he was walking by, and said, 'Behold the lamb of God'. The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, 'What are you seeking?' And they said, 'Master, where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see'. They came and saw where he was staying and they stayed with him.⁴

It is in Christ that we come to know the God whom we seek – 'he who sees me sees the Father';⁵ but more than this, since his relationship with God is human and divine at once, we know from him and in him how we are to seek God, and that the search is a response to the divine invitation, which becomes a command to those who declare their intention of seeking him.

Christ first of all devoted himself to seeking the Father's glory in

¹ Heb 11, 6.

⁴ Jn 1, 37.

² Jn 14, 16.

⁵ Jn 14, 9.

³ Acts 17, 27.

humility and obedience,¹ and thus achieved the object of all human search, the fulness of life and happiness:² yet indirectly, by identifying himself with the Father, in his search for what is lost.³ Christ shows that man has no need to seek his own aggrandizement: the Father sees to that.⁴ If a man in his search devotes himself to becoming, to the Father, what Christ is, there he finds justice, and God provides all; for he himself becomes the all-in-all. The kingdom is already within the heart of those who seek righteousness. In response to the divine invitation 'true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for these the Father seeks to worship him'.⁵

The call of God, the goodness of the Father, is meant to lead us to repentance,⁶ to that *metanoia* which implies a conversion of the whole man, a complete self-dedication to God and to the ways of his kingdom. This is why the seeking is so often related to prayer, and the divine response to prayer:

I tell you, ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks, finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.⁷

The refusal or failure to ask is the sign of an unconverted life.⁸ The seeking is to be constant, unwearying, even importunate.⁹ But behind all our petitions will be the recognition that our basic need is for God's 'best gift', his holy Spirit, which the Father, in his charity, is so desirous of giving to those who seek him.¹⁰

Almost by definition, the christian seeker is one who is convinced of the love which God the Father has for him;¹¹ and the great and lasting proof of this love is Jesus Christ incarnate: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'.¹² And Paul adds:

If God is for us, who stands against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?¹³

The Church, says St Irenaeus, is constantly engaged in theological searching into the data of revelation, 'but that the Word was made

¹ Jn 17, 4; cf Phil 2, 6-8.

² Mt 18, 12-14; Lk 15, 3-10.

⁶ Rom 2, 7. ⁷ Lk 11, 9-10.

¹⁰ Lk 11, 11-13. ¹¹ 1 Jn 4, 16.

² Cf Phil 2, 9; Heb 5, 7-9; 12, 2.

⁴ Jn 8, 50.

⁸ Isai 65.

¹² Jn 3, 16.

⁵ Jn 4, 23.

⁹ Lk 11, 5-8.

¹³ Rom 8, 31.

flesh and suffered for us, for this we can only give thanks'.¹

So it is that the prayerful seeking of the christian is always suffused with thanksgiving, as well as with confidence. It is not that we can always be thankful *for* everything; even Christ our Lord in his agony appears to have been incapable of this, and contented himself with saying: 'Father, if it is your will, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will but yours be done'.² But he who seeks the kingdom with Christ will give thanks to the Father and glorify him *in* everything because already 'he has transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son'.³

At the same time, though the search for the kingdom clearly involves the mortification of all that holds us fast in our self-love, effectively preventing us from reaching outwards 'to what lies ahead . . . the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus',⁴ one of its prime characteristics is that joy which is the fruit of the Spirit's love. This is not merely the joy of discovering and possessing, as in the parables of the lost groat, the pearl and the treasure hidden in the field which is worth all that a man has;⁵ it is also the joy of anticipation, rooted in the certainty that persevering searching brings the prize; so that ultimately seeking is as good as finding; to seek the Lord perseveringly, patiently, confidently, is to see him and to have him in faith. As the contemplative will say:

The seeking is common – every soul can have that, of his grace, and ought to have it: spiritual discernment and the teaching of holy Church. It is God's will that we have three things in our seeking, of his gift. The first is that we seek as earnestly and willingly, without sloth, as may be with his grace; and gladly and merrily, without unreasonable heaviness or vain sorrow. The second is that we wait on him steadfastly, for his love, without grudging or striving against him, unto our life's end; for it shall last but a while. The third is that we trust in him mightily, with full and true faith.⁶

Our Lord makes a point of counselling vigilance and perseverance in our seeking, when he paints his picture of the faithful servant and the steward, who already in a measure possess the kingdom, the treasure on which they have set their hearts.⁷ St Gregory is glossing

¹ *Adversus Haereses* 1, 4, 6.

² Lk 22, 42.

³ Col 1, 13.

⁴ Phil 3, 4-14.

⁵ Lk 16, 8-9; Mt 13, 44-45.

⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. James Walsh (London 1961), p 65.

⁷ Lk 12, 32-44.

this counsel when he says: 'all holy desires grow by delays; and if they diminish by delays, then they were never holy desires'.¹

Just as the Lord's patient and long-suffering seeking of his people is out of his perfect charity,² so our seeking of him may also be described as the pursuit of perfect charity.³ It is the love which is poured out in our hearts by the Spirit of God who is given to us⁴ as we repeatedly ask the Father for his best gift. It is this charity that Paul wants for his ephesians – the infinite dimensions of the kingdom of his love,⁵ which will never be fully ours, which we are destined to go on seeking and finding across the ages of eternity.⁶

This love, in practice, is simple: it is our day-to-day neighbourly charity which demands the continual sacrifice of self-love. Practical love of one's neighbour is the justice that we seek, God's righteousness, his behaviour and attitudes towards his creatures and children, as these are revealed in Christ. So Paul says that we are imitators of God, in so far as we walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.⁷ So we see, finally, that to seek God's kingdom and his justice, a word so often used by the hebrew for almsgiving,⁸ is to respond to the Father's call to share his providential care of those in need: which is precisely the spirit which animates the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* – Joy and Hope! It is faith and love which breathe forth the joy and the hope which the world longs for, and which normally, they cannot experience without justice. In so far as we give the world God's justice, in its fullest sense, we give precisely what God asks of us.

This christian love is expressed very forcibly by St Irenaeus, when he says that we shall be strangers to the Lord, far from him, unlike to him, whenever we have the means to do good to our neighbour, and fail to do it. And on the contrary, we become like him, 'assimilated' to him, in so far as, with him and in him, we feed those who hunger and thirst after justice, which includes all those good things which God has created for man, in the spiritual as well as in the material order. So it is that the Church continues to preach the Lord's message 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his justice'. Let us pray that we may all have ears to hear.

¹ *Hom. in Evang.* II, 23; PL 76, 1190. ² Cf Lk 15, 11–32.

³ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 40.

⁴ Rom 5, 5; 1 Jn 3, 24; 4, 13.

⁵ Eph 3, 17–19.

⁶ The greek fathers had a word for this eternal seeking and longing for God, which is taken from St Paul's 'reaching outwards and upwards' in Phil 3, 13: *epektasis*. Cf Gregory of Nyssa: *De Vita Moysi*, PG 44, 404.

⁷ Eph 5, 1–2.

⁸ Cf Deut 6, 25; 24, 13; Pss 24, 5; 33, 5; 102, 6; Isai 1, 27; 28, 17; 59, 16; Dan 4, 24; Sir 3, 30; 7, 10; 16, 14.