

# A KINGDOM OF JUSTICE?

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**W**HAT SHOULD Christians hope for in human history? Is a world where justice and peace have triumphed something that we are *commanded* to work and pray for? Or only *permitted* to dream about? Or perhaps *forbidden* by the gospel to entertain as a real possibility? Listen to the voices of two popes:

No more war, war never again. . . . If you want to be brothers, let the weapons fall from your hands. You cannot love with weapons in your hands. . . . This is a goal worthy of your efforts; this is what the peoples of the world expect from you. This is what must be achieved.<sup>1</sup>

So spoke Paul VI at the United Nations in 1965.

In this world a totally and permanently peaceful human society is unfortunately a utopia, and . . . ideologies that hold up that prospect as easily attainable are based on hopes that cannot be realized, whatever the reason behind them.<sup>2</sup>

So wrote John Paul II in his World Day of Peace message in 1982.

When Christians traditionally have given credal voice to their deepest aspirations, they have said, 'We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of *the world to come*'. And their dominant expectations for the present world have found no more eloquent or poignant expression than in the prayer to Mary, 'mourning and weeping in *this valley of tears* . . . *after this our exile* show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus'. This, too, is how we have been led to interpret the verse of the petrine letter, 'According to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet 3,13). In a word, we Christians have been taught to hope for heaven, not for heaven on earth.

## *A more recent view*

But in the past century, partly in response to the charge of Marx and others that Christianity, by offering only 'pie in the sky when you die', has enervated humankind in its call to shape history, other voices have been heard. In some circles of liberation theology, as well as among those who envisage humanity today as confronted with the stark choice of either annihilation through nuclear and

ecological catastrophe, or else a giant leap to a world order of peace and justice, there is decidedly less resignation to the inevitability of massive injustice. While promising no millenium — a thousand years of Christ's earthly reign and happiness for humankind — these voices maintain that a new world order of basic peace and justice is no mere utopian dream but a possibility for whose realization we are all responsible.

What are we to think of these new currents? How should a spiritual Christian who is sincerely intent on moving beyond 'privatism' — a faith and spirituality which neglect responsibility for the source of public life — conceive the goal of engagement in the struggle for peace and justice? Is the goal of the social mission of the Church the creation of a just world, or is it merely the lessening of injustice in a world which will never be just? On the basis of the gospel as well as from plain common sense, does one have to agree, for example, with the *New York Times* asserting that nuclear arms are here to stay, and that the best we can hope for in an imperfect world is a vigilant containment or prevention of their actual use, together with a reduction of the massive injustice to the poor of the world, and of the threat to the environment entailed by the manufacture and testing of nuclear weapons?

#### *The case against a kingdom of justice*

Both a common sense based on experience and a sound theological reading of the gospel would seem to endorse a reluctant but decisive 'yes' to the question just posed. After all, a world of peace and justice would be created by and for the likes of people like ourselves. Allowing for the tiny proportion of saints among us, how can we reasonably expect of ourselves such a prodigious achievement? Look at day-to-day existence in families and Church communities. Even with the bond of kinship or religious and ethnic solidarity to support us, are not our efforts for domestic small scale peace and justice generally partial and fragile in their results? The melancholy statistics on divorce, the widespread child and wife abuse in our society, and the general breakdown of family life in the industrialized western world hardly encourage us to dream of any real change in the condition of our larger world.

Beneath the social and ethical instability of family and other forms of community life an even more desultory picture greets us when we look at individuals. Surely an international order of peace and justice will be no better in its quality than the quality of the persons

who, ultimately, compose it? Who are these people from whom we might expect the realization of the dream of peace and justice in history? I ask this question sitting in my room in downtown Manhattan, surrounded by the noises of one of our great cities. When I go out to walk or shop or ride the subway, what are people like? There are thousands of 'street people' and 'paper bag ladies', economically and psychologically crippled just for providing for their own personal well-being. There are thousands too engaged in crime, violent or not: the pimps and the prostitutes; the drug dealers and addicts (these latter from all classes of society); the proprietors and customers of 'massage parlours' and shops offering 'adult' reading and films; those skilled in picking pockets or showing already rich individual or corporate clients how to cheat on taxes, how to manipulate the consumer, how to drive an unjust bargain with employees. Or more commonly, we see people whose limited energies are spent 'looking after number one', without engaging in quixotic risks for the sake of some visionary future for humankind.

Back home, when I watch television, I wonder about the quality of consciousness and freedom assumed in the audience by these programmes, and by the advertisements which make them possible. Often I ask: are these the people who will affect the radical transformation of society into a world where justice dwells? Or are they rather, now on a global scale, the same sheep lying without a shepherd whom Jesus saw on the hillside of Galilee — manipulated masses dwelling in illusion, grist for the military-technological-communicational mill which grinds away in a society and culture almost beyond redemption?

#### *Theological confirmation*

This melancholy contribution of experience and common sense would appear to be confirmed by a sound theological understanding of christian revelation. The Council of Trent, in formulating the tension between sin and holiness in the baptized Christian, dealt with the key spiritual concept of concupiscence. It understood concupiscence in the baptized to be, on the one hand, not truly and properly sin; yet the Council said that concupiscence is correctly designated by the term 'sin' because it comes from sin and inclines us towards sin. Then, in a phrase rich in its spiritual implications, the Council indicates that this abiding of concupiscence in those who have become holy in baptism is *ad agonem* — for the sake of the *struggle*, the christian combat, the sharing of the cross of Christ.

If no individual is to expect a life on earth free from the struggle with sin or exempt from bearing the cross of Christ, how much more is this true of society as a whole? Many years ago in a perceptive article on secularization, Karl Rahner indicated that the tridentine statement on concupiscence admits of a societal as well as a personal interpretation. 'The world', that is, secular reality, reflects the ambiguity and ambivalence of the persons who shape it and are in turn shaped by it. To the same degree to which concupiscence in the individual can be termed sin, the world can be termed sinful; its concrete workings derive from sin and incline towards sin.

The recent language of 'sinful structures' and 'institutional violence' is well grounded in theology. As even the holiest of persons must struggle till death with the empire of sin, so also the struggle of Christ and sin will be waged in society until the second coming. Some would say, in fact, that the sin of the world surpasses in tenacity and depth the sins of persons. Societal concupiscence, even more than the concupiscence of individuals, is so deeply rooted in the complex processes of culture that any hope of overcoming or even neutralizing it must be judged to be illusory. The 'principalities and powers' (Eph 1,21; Col 1,16), the 'rulers of this age' (1 Cor 2,8), terms in which Paul mythically expresses the enslavement from which Christ has come to set us free, find a more rational equivalent in the iniquitous structures and institutions which impede the justice and peace of the world. In God's mysterious providence of peace through the cross, there is simply no escape from this societal *ad agonem*. We know only two human beings, Jesus and Mary, who have been immaculately conceived and totally free from sin and concupiscence. Theology does not foreclose the abstract possibility of a similar gift for other persons, but it does seem to render absurd the hope for an end within history to the presence of the sin of the world and the need to struggle for justice in the face of injustice.

Some, especially in the protestant tradition, would add an even more dour analysis of our chances for substantive amelioration of the world's condition through the power of the gospel. They tend to set sharp boundaries between private and public sectors so far as the direct influence of christian *agape* on the latter is concerned. Whatever heights of love may be attained through God's grace by individuals and groups in private life, once the threshold of public and political life is crossed we are in the realm of a pragmatic human justice which the gospel can touch only indirectly, through the motivation and virtue of committed christian citizens and public

servants. According to this view political and ethical realism becomes the name of the game when Christians engage in politics. *Agape* was never intended by the Lord to find its way into the structures of society. It suffices that they be just, by human standards, and to a degree.

*The case for a kingdom of justice*

The sober response just given to our question may well be a correct one, at least in its 'eschatological proviso', and its insistence that only when Christ comes again — at a time of his choosing, not ours — to transfigure history and judge the nations, will human life be totally free of the violence of war and injustice. Still, there is a danger in letting such a word be the last word, the danger that Christians, despite moderate efforts to improve the world, may succumb to a more radical apathy. While insisting on a theology of the cross for public as well as private life, we must not neglect what a theology of the resurrection might have to say to us about the necessity of dreaming, not indeed of heaven on earth, but of a world in which Paul VI's dream of peace has been literally fulfilled, and with it the dream of many lovers of humankind for a just world order.

What does the mystery of the resurrection say to us about this kind of dream for human history? In a sound theological understanding it says first that there is no basis in the gospel for limiting to the personal and private spheres of life the fulfilment of the promise of a new creation inaugurated on the first Easter morning. As God's Word in the incarnation assumed without exception all that is human, earthly and cosmic, so God's Son in the resurrection has begun to transfigure the whole of the creation. On no sound philosophical or theological basis can it be maintained that the risen Saviour makes possible the holiness of individuals and communities but not the holiness of society.

With Christ's death and resurrection, Karl Rahner says, the Saviour does not become acosmic, but rather becomes the very heart of the world. If we take this statement seriously, as we must, it means that the primary immanent agent in the struggle for peace and justice in the world is the risen Lord. Are we to say that he is strong enough to vanquish the enemy of our human nature where there is a question of personal holiness, but too weak to challenge the empire of Satan in its citadel, the oppressive structures of our social, economic and political world? To suggest this would be to neglect Paul's word to the Corinthians that Christ is progressively to rule

until he has put *all* his enemies under his feet (1 Cor 15,25). It is not until this has taken place, apparently within history, that the Son is to hand over the Kingdom to the Father.

The same confident expectation of peace and justice for the earth may be expressed in the language of the Spirit, the first gift of the risen Lord to his Church and to humankind. If we take Pentecost with theological seriousness, we have to affirm that the immanent processes of the cosmos now have as their most powerful energizing force the Spirit of God as the deepest reality within the creation. The Spirit of the Lord has filled the whole world, and that which holds all things together — the Spirit — knows every word that is spoken (Wis 1,7). It has not, as yet, eliminated all that contradicts God, but its groaning on behalf of the saints is surely more powerful than the voice of evil. Paul's ecstatic assurance of victory in Romans (chapter 8) includes the certainty that the principalities and powers cannot stand in the way of the victory of God in Christ Jesus effected through the mission of the Spirit.

#### *Risen in the social body*

In one of the appearances of the risen Lord to his disciples they are described as simultaneously filled with joy and incredulous. 'They stood there dumbfounded' (Lk 24,41). Mark shows us Jesus rebuking the eleven for their incredulity and obstinacy (Mk 16,14). I suspect that, so far as believing that Jesus has risen in the social body of humankind is concerned, most of us stand in need of infinitely more joy and infinitely less incredulity.<sup>3</sup> The situation and attitudes of most Christians today are not unlike those of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24). The nuclear arms race, as qualified critics have noted, has done incalculable damage to humankind without a single nuclear weapon having been used. It has sown despair in the depths of our consciousness and even within our unconscious life. Psychiatrists who deal with children and adolescents testify to the psychic wound which is depriving young people of hope. Not a few openly acknowledge that they have no desire to bring children into a world which will shortly annihilate them, or at least condemn them to live out their lives in dread of annihilation.

#### *Withstanding societal despair*

A similar despair comes to many from their contemplation of the progressive deterioration of our earthly environment, the wholesale

depleting of our energy resources by a trivializing consumerism, and the recurring crises of hunger and starvation in the most afflicted Third World countries. It is precisely such humanly hopeless situations which call for a resurrection faith on the part of Christians. If Luke's account of the encounter on the road to Emmaus is taken seriously, it means that even here — especially here, in the presence of the threat of human annihilation — it is time for a radical hope. This hope is something very different from any easy optimism based on an illusory or superficial analysis of our present predicament. The resurrection was God's absolute surprise for our humanity. To be Christian is to be ready to be 'surprised by joy'. To be faithful to the resurrection we must be willing to expect the unexpected.

'Is anything too wonderful for Yahweh?' (Gen 18,14). God's rebuke to Sara for doubting his power to enliven her womb, his rendering Zachary dumb for a similar reason (Lk 1,20), and Jesus's frequent excoriations at the lack of trust of those who had witnessed God's power at work in his miracles, will surely fall on Christians of the present generation unless we dare to hope for deliverance from our present distress. 'With God all things are possible'. (Mt 19,25).

Though the challenge to hope radically has no adequate rational basis — otherwise it would not be hope — it does find confirmation in christian history. Where Christians have taken the gospel seriously, they — or rather God through their trust and courage — has created new structures of grace to displace sinful structures. The contribution of the monastic life to ancient and medieval civilization, and the great systems of schools and hospitals in modern centuries, are examples of the power of faith to overcome public evil with public good. The *Magna Carta* and the human rights achievements of the french and american revolutions represent major milestones in the development of moral consciousness touching public life. More dramatically, the virtual disappearance of slavery from the earth is the most striking instance of how a resurrection faith can overcome massive injustice. Though the struggle is still being waged, capital punishment is another area where increasing sensitivity to human dignity has been challenging a societal practice that is ancient and ingrained. And though abortion has come in our day to have an unprecedented cultural and political acceptance, its gross affront to the dignity of the unborn has evoked in thousands of Christians a passionate counter-cultural resistance. Paul's admonition, 'Resist evil, and conquer it with good' (Rom 12,21), is being applied today as never before with respect to societal injustice.

*Non-violent resistance*

Though our generation is witnessing a paroxysm of violence — passionate and personal violence based on ingrained ethnic, national and religious hatreds, cold technological violence of modern warfare and a passionless economic system — it has also experienced a leap forward in the heightening of moral consciousness, at least among a significant minority of people. The philosophy, spirituality and technique of non-violent resistance to injustice, for example, represent a notable societal grace bestowed by God as a powerful vehicle for creating a just and peaceful world. Though its most famous exponent, Gandhi, was not a Christian, its congruity with the gospel has led people like Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and Helder Camara to embrace it as a sacrament of hope for our world.

One of the contributions of non-violence as a political force is to manifest that christian utopianism is not passive acquiescence in injustice. Though its reliance is on God's power, not on human resources, such a radical trust paradoxically energizes the non-violent for perseverance in active resistance to evil. Paul's exhortation to the Philippians, just after he had held out to them the example of Christ Jesus exalted because of his *kenosis*, admits of such a paradoxical interpretation. It is because of, and not in spite of, *God* being powerfully at work in us to effect both our firm will and our accomplishment that *we* are to lend all our energies to promoting God's purpose in the world (Phil 2,12-13). The utopian dream sparked by faith in the resurrection will be known as authentic to the degree to which it generates realistic concrete projects for bringing peace and justice to the world.

*Psychological aspects*

In this connection we need to acknowledge, of course, that utopian dreaming comes more naturally to some people than to others. Current interest in jungian typology in North America has been spiritually helpful in this regard.<sup>4</sup> Those spontaneously inclined to deal with impasse situations through the imaginative conceiving of alternatives are a much needed resource today.<sup>5</sup> The power of prophetic imagination was never more needed for rescuing humans from despair in the face of massive societal problems.<sup>6</sup> But it is crucial that such a gift — of the dreamer, the prophet, the fool — be integrated with a gift which is just the opposite: namely the ability to keep in touch with the hard facts of our human predicament. Here is

where the 'intuiters' and the 'sensors', the dreamers and the realists, need to be willing to share, and share in, contrasting gifts and types of behaviour. Both young and old need to see visions and dream dreams (Acts 2,17; Joel 3,1), but also to take the next step in the journey. Nor is it merely a question of pooling and balancing psychological gifts. God is the only one who can bring justice to the earth. It is a matter of discerning the spirits, to test the quality of dreaming for escapism, and the quality of realism for immobilism. The one Spirit, working through opposite psychological gifts and types, is alone able to make the struggle for a just world one that is according to God.

While acknowledging that the gospel does not lend support to any expectation of heaven on earth, I have tried to indicate that neither does it countenance despair of achieving a world order free from the radical injustices of the present time and from the threat of the annihilation of humankind by humankind. I have argued that we are summoned by the gospel, and more specifically by a resurrection faith, to work seriously for the realization of the Kingdom of God in history. That such a realization will not be flawless goes without saying. Even when the nations of the world have laid down their arms, have established a global political structure to replace our outdated system of national sovereignty, and have secured for the poor of the world their basic human rights, there will still be need for fidelity and forgiveness for persons, groups, and society as a whole. The presence of death — especially spiritual death — in the midst of life will still require that the pardon and peace of Christ be carried to successive generations by the Church. And finally we can never forget that a resurrection faith is a faith without guarantees, a faith that lives from the word of Jesus to Thomas, 'Blessed are they who have not yet seen, and yet have believed' (Jn 20,29).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Grenillion, J.: *The gospel of peace and justice* (New York, 1976), p 383f.

<sup>2</sup> *Origins* 11 (1982), p 478.

<sup>3</sup> On Jesus as risen in the social body see Haughey, J.: 'Eucharist of Corinth', in Clarke, T. (ed.): *Above every name: the Lordship of Christ and social systems* (New York, 1980), pp 107-33.

<sup>4</sup> See Grant, W. H., Thompson, M., Clarke, T.: *From image to likeness: a jungian path in the gospel journey* (New York, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> For a reflection on impasse and imagination see Fitzgerald, C., in Edwards, T. (ed.): *Living with apocalypse: spiritual exercises for social compassion* (New York, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> See Brueggemann, W.: *The prophetic imagination* (Philadelphia, 1978).