

FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM

By JOHN R. SHEETS

WHEN ALL is said and done, the mystery of christian celibacy has meaning only in relationship to the mystery of the kingdom of God. When all speculation is over, we have to return to the simple words of the gospel, where the meaning of celibacy is situated within the mystery of the kingdom of God. The very simplicity of the words hides a richness we cannot exhaust. Christ sees the mystery of celibacy as related to the mystery of his kingdom.

In a very real sense there is a parallel between the mystery of Christ's relationship to the kingdom and the mystery of celibacy and the kingdom. Christ's own mystery interpenetrates the mystery of the kingdom. He expresses in his own life all that is in the kingdom. At the same time he gives the kingdom its existence and its meaning. He is centre, circumference, and the area in between.

Christian celibacy has a similar relationship to the kingdom. It is centre, focal point, both diffused throughout the kingdom, as well as concentrated in a point of focus, and in a sense a circumference of light that circumscribes the whole kingdom. These are the points we would like to develop in what follows. We would like to see how celibacy is the concentrated expression of the dynamics of the kingdom, bringing into a living focus the uniqueness of the reality of the kingdom. The mystery of celibacy is diffused throughout the whole of the kingdom. It is atomized, so to speak, and sprayed throughout the whole of the kingdom to supply the atmosphere for life in the kingdom. It is also the circumference of the kingdom, where circumference means something more than a limit. It brings out the fact that the reality within the kingdom can only be lived as an expression of the reality which surrounds it, embraces it, makes it one.

To appreciate the meaning of celibacy, then, in relationship to the kingdom, it will be helpful first to reflect on the passage where Christ speaks about celibacy for the kingdom of God.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

The text

In answer to a test question put to him by the pharisees concerning divorce, Christ is led to speak of the nature of marriage as it was at the beginning in the mind of the Creator. He then goes on to speak of the re-establishment of the indissoluble bond of marriage. This gave rise to the understandable objection raised by his disciples. Such a life would simply be too much for human nature.

The disciples said to him, 'If that is the position with husband and wife, it is better to refrain from marriage'. To this he replied, 'That is something which not everyone can accept, but only those for whom God has appointed it. For while some are incapable of marriage because they were born so, or were made so by men, there are others who have themselves renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let those accept it who can'.

It will be helpful to comment first of all on the text; then to draw out some of the implications.¹ We shall take the passage as a theological unit, as intended by Matthew, prescinding from the technical questions concerning the original form of the verses before their final redaction.

It is to be noted first of all that there is a progression in the discourse. It begins with the question of divorce and ends with a declaration of the value of celibacy for the kingdom of God. The authoritative tone of Christ is striking here as throughout the gospel. He does not attempt to persuade by argumentation or listing authorities. He simply declares God's purpose in the beginning and the restoration of the initial purpose. The restoration is a sign of the definitive coming of the kingdom of God, which will not allow even the concession granted by Moses for the hardness of human hearts.

With the coming of the kingdom, however, there is not only a restoration and re-establishment of an 'old' reality, but something more. An entirely new reality comes into being. It is celibacy for the

¹ In an article, 'Made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven', CBQ 30(1968), pp 335-358, Quentin Quesnell S.L., taking up a theory proposed earlier by Dupont, argues that the passage does not refer to celibates in the strict sense, but rather to those who find themselves in an intolerable marriage, yet in obedience to the demands of the kingdom, do not seek to dissolve the bond. His position is competently argued. However, it leaves the overall impression of being forced and contrived. To take the expression, 'to make oneself a eunuch', as referring simply to a life of continence imposed because of an intolerable marriage does not do justice to the passage (Cf *supra*, pp 50 ff.). Schillebeeckx rejects the interpretation of Dupont. Cf Schillebeeckx, E. O.P.: *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London, 1965), pp 119 ff. Cf Mt 19, 10-12.

kingdom. It is a 'new creature' that emerges from the completely new reality of the kingdom. The newness of celibacy matches the newness of the kingdom itself.

The progression in the discourse is brought out by a certain *crescendo*, first of all in the stages of God's creative activity, then in man's response. The first stage is God's primordial creative act establishing marriage as the union of two persons in one flesh; the next stage is that of restoration or of re-creation of the marriage bond; the third stage is the revelation of a special creative gift 'for those for whom God has appointed', the gift of celibacy, intimately linked to the kingdom. The same gift, however, which renders celibacy possible also renders the restoration of marriage possible. The very same reality that serves to restore and elevate a 'natural' reality like marriage at the same time gives rise to a new form of life, the life of celibacy, which in its newness matches the eschatological nature of the kingdom.

Just as the passage brings out the progression in God's creative giving, it also manifests stages in the response asked of men. Man is asked, first of all, to be faithful, no matter how great the difficulties, to the bond of marriage, because it was established as indissoluble by God, and now because of a new motive, the kingdom of God. But there is a further stage. He is asked to open himself to a mode of life that seems to be foreign to man's existence – the life of celibacy for the kingdom of God. Christ added, 'That is something which not everyone can accept, but only those for whom God has appointed it . . . Let those accept it who can'.

It is taken for granted as obvious that everyone can accept marriage, though they might naturally have problems with the difficulties that arise in marriage, particularly if the marriage bond is indissoluble. No one, however, is normally inclined to lead a life in which marriage is renounced. It is a special challenge, and requires a special gift. It is interesting to note, that the word Matthew uses here for 'accept', or 'receive', literally means 'to make room for'. Christ's words can be paraphrased: 'Let the one to whom the gift is given make room for it'.

The whole dialogue, therefore, comes to two points: through the definitive presence of the kingdom, there is *restoration* and *innovation*. Marriage is restored. Celibacy is innovated. However, as was mentioned above, even the restoration is possible only because marriage becomes 'energized' with the newness of the reality of the kingdom.

Situating Celibacy within the mystery of the Kingdom

We have intimated that celibacy cannot be understood simply as 'another counsel' on an equal footing with the other demands of the gospel. It is a form of life in which the 'counsel-dimension' implicit in every other aspect of the kingdom is brought forth and displayed. It is the 'axis-counsel' around which all of the other characteristics of the kingdom cluster. Throughout the whole reality of the kingdom there is a hidden drift toward 'celibacy for the kingdom of God'. Celibacy is the 'coming to term' of the real but unperceived ordination that is at the heart of all activity truly worthy of the kingdom of God.

The life of celibacy is not, then, just another flower in the bouquet of christian virtues. Teilhard de Chardin was closer to the reality when he spoke of christian purity in terms of the whole of christian life as centred on God. For him, the torque which turned all activity to the centre was an aspect of purity. This is what we mean when we say that the reality which finds its visible expression in the life of celibacy is present as an orientating influence at the heart of every genuine activity of the kingdom.

But it is time to be more specific about the inter-relationship of celibacy and the kingdom. Is it justified to see celibacy as a condensed convergence of every other aspect of the kingdom, to see in celibacy a simple, visible index of what is hidden in the depths of the kingdom? To substantiate this we have to investigate three fundamental aspects of the kingdom: as the lived mystery of man's *immediate* union with God, brought about through a fulfilment which is both *continuous and discontinuous*, and lived out through a life of *renunciation*.

The Kingdom as the mystery of immediate union with God

What is the nature of the mystery of the kingdom? This is obviously a subject so large that we can do no more than allude to what seem to be the most fundamental characteristics of the kingdom. It is above all a mystery of union, a mystery of bridal existence, where two are united in one flesh. It is the union of Christ and mankind in the flesh (or the Person) of Christ. The blood of the New Covenant, poured into us through the Spirit, creates a new family, with a new bond of life.

The new life of the member of the kingdom is basically virginal, whether he is married or not. First of all, his birth as a child of God is not from flesh, or blood, or the will of man, but from God

alone.¹ 'That which is born of the spirit is spirit, and that which is born of the flesh is flesh'.² Every birth from the spirit is a virginal birth, effecting a new being through a mode of generation like that of Christ himself. Christ came into the world through the immediate action of the spirit on the person of Mary, not mediately, through the normal way a child is generated, by the union of man and wife. It is similar with the birth of the member of the kingdom.

Further, the life of the christian is virginal not only because he was generated in a virginal way as a member of the kingdom but because his whole mode of life is characterized by his immediate union with Christ in a covenantal bond. This is brought out in the Old Testament by the theme of God's union with Israel as a union of husband and wife. In the New Testament it is Christ who becomes husband and the Church his bride. The virginal existence Paul ascribes to the Church is true of each individual member as well as of the community: 'I arranged for you to marry Christ so that I might give you away as a chaste virgin to this one husband'.³ In this sense the marriage of christians 'in the Lord' is itself an expression of their virginal union with Christ. The only thing that violates the virginal union of Christ and the christian is sin.

At the very heart of the mystery of the kingdom, then, is the mystery of an existence through a union that is virginal. (For our purposes here it is not necessary to make a close distinction in our use of the words 'virginal' and 'celibate'.) It is the mystery of the *immediate* union of persons, where one is divine, the other, human.

This helps us to realize how Christ's celibacy eminently expresses his own mysterious relationship to the members of the kingdom. All the positive characteristics that belong to married love, providing that they are raised to an unsurpassable degree, can be ascribed to Christ's love of the Church – all except one. Christ's love for the Church is intimate, permanent, fulfilling, creative, sacrificial, jealous, fruitful, a union of 'two in one flesh' far beyond that of human marriage. Yet, unlike human marriage, Christ's love is not *exclusive but includes* all members of the kingdom, and ultimately the whole of mankind. By its nature human marriage is the union of two persons in one flesh. It excludes this same kind of union with another. Christ's marriage is the union of himself not with one person in human marriage, but with the flesh of mankind. Christ's celibacy,

¹ Jn 1, 13.

² Jn 3, 6.

³ 2 Cor 11, 2.

therefore, is only the 'outside' of what is an inner reality. His love is completely inclusive. Because his love is deeply personal, it is also most social, taking in all the members of the kingdom.

The call to renounce marriage for the kingdom of God is an invitation to profess as a way of life the mystery at the heart of the kingdom: the new existence as sons born of the spirit, not by human means; and immediate union with the Lord through grace, a bridal existence, in which Christ and the christian are united as husband and spouse. Christ's own celibacy, we saw, was the 'without', expressing the unseen but real nature of his union with the Church. Similarly the life of celibacy in the Church becomes the 'without', expressing the virginal nature of the union of Christ and the Church.

The Kingdom as the mystery of fulfilment: continuity-discontinuity

The kingdom came into existence through the incarnation of Christ, his redemptive death, and the gift of the Spirit. What is striking about this is the pattern of continuity and discontinuity. The kingdom comes about not simply by rising out of what went before, that is, in continuity with what went before. It is a new outburst of creative love on the part of God. The very abundance of the gift, however, creates a discontinuity. The mystery of the incarnation is so great that it 'explodes' all continuity. It is like a sudden jump from zero to infinity. The resurrection of Christ, his ascension, the gift of the Spirit – all of these belong to the same pattern of discontinuity. By this we mean to say that the fulfilment ordained by the Father goes beyond any fulfilment that could come in a continuous line with man's own efforts.

At the same time, the discontinuity creates a new continuity. It is as if the whole of nature and history went to prepare man's lips and tongue to utter a word. Before his lips could form the human word, God places there a Word from above, which gives its own shape to man's lips. The reaching, searching, groping is from below, but the fulfilment is from above. At the same time the fulfilment from above fulfils the search far beyond man's natural expectations.

The mystery of the kingdom is, then, a mystery of continuity with all that went before, but also of discontinuity in terms of the gift from above. But what does this have to do with the mystery of celibacy?

Celibacy for the kingdom of God shows forth the continuity of God's kingdom as the fulfilment of all that went before, but also the 'impossibility' of the complete newness of the kingdom as it comes

from above. The mystery of union that is at the heart of the kingdom is one that builds on all that comes from below, but is brought to fruition only through a unity coming from above. The kingdom is a meeting of the earthly city being built up from below, and the heavenly city coming down from above. But it is the heavenly city which gives the kingdom its surpassing form and engulfs it in the mystery of the unity of the triune God.

Putting this in another way, the mystery of the kingdom, as we mentioned above, is a mystery of *restoration* and of *innovation*. Along the lines of continuity, marriage, for example is restored. Along the line of discontinuity, celibacy is innovated. Yet we always have to keep in mind that even the restoration of all that is along the line of continuity comes from what is discontinuous, that is, from the gift from above.

Celibacy, therefore, represents the 'possible impossibility' of the kingdom. It represents the fulfilment of the desire which is at the root of our existence, of which every other desire, even sexual desire, is only a partial expression, a desire for complete union with God; and it says, as a living symbol of the reality, that this fulfilment can come only from above. Celibacy, therefore, becomes a lived symbol of the meaning of the kingdom, fulfilment of all that comes from below, through a gift that comes from above.

We have considered, then, the mystery of the kingdom in terms of the immediacy of the union of the members with God, and have seen that celibacy represents the immediacy of this union; we have also considered the mystery of the kingdom as it comes into existence through fulfilment that comes from above, that is, a mystery of continuity-discontinuity, and have seen how celibacy is the lived expression of this, as it brings out not simply restoration of what is 'old', but as it exhibits the complete newness of the kingdom by making men 'children of the resurrection' even in this life.¹

The Kingdom as a mystery of renunciation

Finally we would like to see how this mystery of the kingdom is translated into action. If the basic mystery is that of a virginal union brought about by the continuity-discontinuity aspect of the fulfilment, the way that this is translated into action is characterized chiefly by the gospel doctrine of *renunciation*.

¹ Lk 20, 36.

The fulfilment, we have seen, does not come from below by a slow process of maturation, but from an explosion of love from above. This gift from above creates distance at the same time that it creates union. It is this paradox of distance and union that lies at the centre of the gospel's message of renunciation. Renunciation creates distance. In this way it manifests the discontinuity of the gift from above. At the same time it must be noted that it can create distance only because it proceeds from love and leads to greater love.

The idea of renunciation, or of 'distancing' oneself, runs throughout the gospel. It is impossible to do anything more in the limits we have than to indicate this. The whole Sermon on the Mount, for example, is an invitation to the disciple to 'distance' himself from what he naturally loves – his comfort, honour, health, nation, even the Law – in order to find the fulfilment in the kingdom. In various places in the gospel he is invited to 'distance' himself from father, mother, son, daughter, wife, wealth, all he possesses, even life itself, in order to find fulfilment in the kingdom.

This whole doctrine of renunciation is summed up in Christ's words: 'The last shall be first, and the first last'.¹ These words come as a response to Peter's question concerning the reward those would have who left all things to follow him. The paradoxical nature of the kingdom is described thus in a succinct fashion. In the eyes of the world, what appears to be emptiness, negation, an absence, a distancing of self from the world, in a word, what appears to make a person 'last', is in reality a fulness, an affirmation, a presence, a closeness, arising from union with Christ, and leading to greater union. All this is seen in an eminent degree, of course, in the life of Christ himself. Through his life as the servant of the Lord he was 'last'; yet he is 'first' through the fulness of life given to him at the resurrection. Isaiah had prophetically perceived this mystery: 'See, my servant will prosper, he shall be lifted up, exalted, rise to great heights'.²

The life of renunciation demanded by the gospel turns out to be, then, a way of *annunciation* of the central meaning of the gospel. The negation that is part of the gospel message is seen to be based on the affirmation of the one thing necessary, one's salvation through union with Christ. The life of renunciation from one point of view is a negative stance taken toward the world. Yet if its real meaning is perceived, it becomes the opening through which the waters flow to recreate the world anew.

¹ Mt 19, 30.

² Isai 52, 13.

Christ taught the paradoxical nature of renunciation for the kingdom through the simple parables of the treasure and the pearl.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found: he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it.¹

Renunciation of everything one possesses is possible only because one finds the concentration of all that one possesses, and more besides, in a single completely fulfilling reality. As Francis Thompson expressed it: 'All which I took from thee I did but take, not for thy harms, but just that thou might'st seek it in My arms'. Renunciation is simply translating into a mode of life the basic pattern of continuity-discontinuity which forms the coordinates that locate every reality in the kingdom. Renunciation has meaning only because the kingdom is a mystery of an 'old' reality encountering a completely new reality, where the new reality creates a double movement, first of distance, then of union.

But how is the doctrine of renunciation epitomized in the life of celibacy?

As we have seen, renunciation is a spirit that is diffused throughout the whole meaning of the kingdom. This spirit should show itself in the life of every member of the kingdom to some extent. For the most part, however, it only surfaces in the lives of most members as 'moments' of renunciation. The life of celibacy however, freely chosen for the kingdom, aims at *stretching out the moment to the whole of a lifetime*. In this way the life of celibacy expresses the *enduring* nature of the spirit of renunciation that belongs to the essence of the kingdom.

The life of celibacy also expresses the *completeness* of this renunciation. There is a certain basic 'distance' which every christian must have from all created things if he is to be saved. The degree of this 'distance' or renunciation will vary with individuals. Celibacy is a living symbol of the completeness of the 'distance' that the christian has to have from all things. The celibate chooses to be 'incomplete', renouncing the completion that comes from having a wife and family. The life of celibacy for the kingdom is indeed a way of giving up

¹ Mt, 13, 44-46.

all things to follow Christ, even approximating to the giving up of life itself.

Further, the life of celibacy expresses not only the distance-as-lived, but also the closeness-as-lived. It is a life that expresses the closeness of Christ to his Church, his fulness filling in our emptiness, his own single-minded, faithful love for the Church. *The life of celibacy then becomes a lived symbol not simply of renunciation but of union*, the mystery of the kingdom as bridal existence. In this way celibacy gathers together in one sign the mystery that is scattered throughout the whole of the kingdom. Celibacy becomes the face of the kingdom. In the human face we see the concentration of the personality. The life of celibacy becomes the face of the Church. It is the concentrated expression of the Church as the bride of Christ. The face of the Church is turned completely toward Christ. The life of celibacy shows the face of the Church turned completely towards Christ as a bride for her husband.

Finally, there is a mysterious *fruitfulness* that flows from the life of celibacy. It may or may not be significant that Matthew adds the passage about Christ and children after the passage concerning celibacy for the kingdom of God.¹ Christ's celibacy was not sterility. As part of his whole mystery, his celibacy brought forth not a family, nor a tribe, nor a nation, but a whole new people.

Conclusion

The mystery of celibacy is part of the mystery of faith itself. Faith is, as it were, the beach-head through which Christ's life enters the world. Through the faith of the Church the holy Spirit inwardly orders the Church as a whole to its bridal relationship with Christ. There is besides a certain parallel in the relationship of the eucharist to the Church and to the world that is also found in the relationship of the celibate life. They are both mysteries of the faith, first of all. Further, in the eucharist the mystery of the kingdom as continuity-discontinuity is found when the gift that comes from us is transformed into the gift that comes from God. In the eucharist we find the mystery of renunciation or sacrifice issuing in the deepest communion. In this way we find a kind of distillation of the mystery of the whole kingdom in the mystery of the eucharist. In somewhat the same way the mystery of celibacy for the kingdom of God is a distillation of the whole mystery of the kingdom.

¹ Mt 19, 14-15.