

THE KINGDOM: THE SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

By JOHN ASHTON

WHEN I WAS first asked to prepare a paper on the biblical background of the exercise on the Kingdom, my first thought was that the characteristic flavour of this exercise is anything but scriptural. The picture Ignatius sketches of the two kings belongs to the twilight of the age of christian chivalry. We are reminded, not agreeably, of the horrible distortions of the Good News that disfigured the crusades. 'It is my firm resolve to conquer the entire territory of the heathen'. Ignatius found this invitation attractive, even urgent; but one can scarcely help reflecting that Jesus of Nazareth, whose message was 'Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you', would have been appalled by it. Eighty years or so after Ignatius had wrestled with the spirits of good and evil in the cave at Manresa, round about the time of the publication of the first official *Directory of the Exercises*, the following words were written: 'He thought it fit and proper, both in order to increase his renown and to serve the state, to turn knight errant and travel through the world with horse and armour in search of adventure, following in every way the practice of the knights errant he had read of, redressing all manner of wrongs, and exposing himself to chances and dangers, by the overcoming of which he might win eternal honour and renown'. No doubt the response to the call of the christian king considered appropriate by Ignatius was more generous, less self-regarding than this; but it was couched in the same language, it follows the same patterns of thought. The difference is that Cervantes was portraying a character whom he knew to be mad, whereas Ignatius was perfectly serious. The Exercises, and the Kingdom in particular, belongs to the age of christendom; and we cannot help looking at its kings and knights over the shoulder of Don Quixote (who, we remember, changed his name from Quixada or Quesada to signify his change of life, just as Ignatius dropped his baptismal name of Iñigo when he abandoned the career of a soldier).

The proximate source of Ignatius's idea of the Kingdom was, I take it, the *Flos Sanctorum*, and in particular the preface by Gauberto

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Vagad. This cistercian monk, an ex-soldier like Ignatius, speaks of the 'knights of God', the saints, who did resplendent deeds in the service of 'the eternal prince, Christ Jesus', the incomparable chief whose 'ever victorious flag' these knights were following.¹ Similarly, the meditation on the *Two Standards* is presumably indebted to the summary of the *City of God* included in the potted biography of St Augustine: 'In it he shows that the just are to be oppressed in this life and the wicked to flourish. He also treats of the two cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, and their kings, for Christ is the king of Jerusalem and the devil of Babylon. Two loves, he says, built these two cities for themselves; for the city of the devil has arisen from the love of self, growing even to contempt of God, and the city of God from the love of God growing even to contempt of self'.² In addition, Ignatius evidently owes a great deal to the *Imitation*; and the attitudes and responses expected of the exercitant have much in common with those of the author of that greatly admired little book. How far, then, can we qualify the resulting mixture, whose final composition is evidently marked by Ignatius's own personality and experience, as biblical?

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Jesus

It must first be emphasized that the object of Jesus's preaching was God's kingdom, not his own. The anticipation of the reign of God was no doubt occasionally associated with the hope of an earthly Messiah; but the kingly authority of the Messiah, such as it was, could not, short of blasphemy, be confused with the sovereignty of God.³ If Jesus accepts the title of 'Messiah', he does so rarely, and in circumstances which preclude any suggestion that he is claiming a kingdom in or of 'this world'.⁴ Apart from the writing affixed to the cross, Jesus's kingship receives only one explicit mention in the synoptics – the words of the dying brigand: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' (*or* in your kingly power).⁵ Even then, Jesus does not accept the implied title: 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise'.

¹ See *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, ed. Ganss, G. E. (St Louis, 1970), p 14.

² *Ibid.*

³ Just such an identification is probably the key to the charge of blasphemy at Jesus's trial before the Sanhedrin.

⁴ Cf Jn 19, 36. I have attempted to summarize the teaching on the kingship of Christ in the Fourth Gospel in my article, 'Authority in the Gospel', in *The Way*, Vol 12, No. 3 (July, 1972), pp 219ff.

⁵ RSV Lk 23, 42.

It may be objected that the message of the gospels does not end with the message of Jesus. And that is true. The exegete's primary task is not the search for the historical Jesus but the elucidation of the meaning of the gospel text. Nevertheless, before we ask ourselves precisely how the New Testament writers thought of Christ's kingship, it is as well to remind ourselves that Jesus himself had few pretensions in this direction: 'Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself',⁶ St John tells us, in a passage that may well depend upon a historical reminiscence. The solemn entry into Jerusalem on the eve of the passion was certainly seen as the fulfilment of a messianic prophecy: 'Lo, your King comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass'.⁷ But if Jesus did enter the city in this way, it is hard to believe that the sense of triumph or victory was uppermost in his mind at that moment.

The New Testament writers

So if Jesus thought of himself as a king, it was with such considerable reservations that the historian is almost justified in ignoring the title altogether. In so far as the evangelists apply it to him they are interpreting the tradition, expressing the truth as they see it in terms that their readers will understand. In some instances, the term 'myth' is not inappropriate to what they were doing. But since my main interest in this paper lies elsewhere, I shall be fairly brief (and necessarily incomplete) at this point.

1. The Christ of the fourth gospel turns the traditional idea of kingship inside out. 'My kingdom is not of this world'. In so far as he claims any authority he does so under two titles: truth and love. His message is true; his actions – and especially his death – are prompted by a totally self-giving love. But these titles so totally transform the idea of kingship as to make it almost irrelevant.

2. Mark stresses the paradox: kingship is realized in suffering and death. The title 'King of the Jews' is placed in the position of maximum contrast between two references to the crucifixion. Hanging on a cross between two criminals, tortured, naked, impotent and abused, Jesus feels himself forsaken even by God. If and only if you see this truth and accept it, are you in a position to appreciate the nature of Jesus's kingship.

⁶ Jn 6, 15.

⁷ Zech 9, 9.

3. Matthew, in his opening chapters, presents us with a contrast between two kings. Oddly, it is King Herod rather than the infant Jesus who shares the limelight in these chapters with Joseph. But this does not matter. What is important is that the presentation of the child as a king, the recipient of royal presents, whose very existence constitutes a threat to the reigning King of Judea, consorts so ill with what we know of the attitudes of the adult Jesus that it must be qualified as mythical. It projects the light of christian belief back upon the historical Jesus and exhibits him in contention with the jewish people as a whole, represented in the person of King Herod (just as at the end of the gospel they are represented by the priests).

4. Several New Testament writers (including St Paul and the author of *Revelations*) were able to think of Jesus as somehow exercising kingly authority, if not in his earthly life then at least in heaven. Two of these, John openly and Mark tacitly, present certain features of the current conception of kingship in order to reject them. In their case we are dealing with an anti-myth, a deliberate exposure of the dangers of thinking of Jesus as a king without making the necessary adjustments. But in Matthew, *Revelations* and to some extent Paul, the reverse is true. In their different ways they accept and apply the myth, legitimately no doubt but not critically. Ignatius, in his own way, does the same. But the Jesus who went preaching through 'the synagogues, towns and villages' of Palestine was not a king, and it is Ignatius, not the New Testament writers, who pictures his calls to discipleship as those of a king addressing his followers.

It is my contention that the myth of the kingship of Christ has been worn threadbare by centuries of uncritical use and needs to be replaced. Nowadays, any man who claimed authority over his fellows simply in virtue of his superior birth would be treated with justifiable derision. The sense of natural equality – another myth perhaps but a much more powerful one in the circumstances of today – makes it impossible for most people to regard a king as anything but a figurehead or a tyrant. He will either be hated or tolerated, but at all events not loved and not followed. Even in Ignatius's use of the myth, we see that the appeal of the divine king is derived more from the moral authority of his message and from his readiness to share hardships with his followers than from any insistence upon his natural right to command. At the end of this paper I shall be proposing some alternative myths or models,

more in tune, I believe, with modern values and preoccupations.

But first we should ask: what is there of permanent value in the exercise on the Kingdom? Or more specifically, for the purpose of this paper, how far is it a faithful interpretation, despite superficial distortions, of the christian revelation as we find it in the bible? And here our question does not concern literary debts or direct borrowings of any sort, but underlying patterns which may be embodied or enfolded by different generations in the manner which suits them best.

There are, it seems to me, two of these: (a) the death-and-resurrection pattern, fundamental both in the preaching of Jesus and in the preaching about him; (b) the vocation-pattern, which implies both call and mission.

Death and Resurrection

The first scriptural pattern discernible in the Kingdom is so all-pervasive in the christian tradition that it would seem scarcely to call for comment. It is well expressed in an early hymn quoted in the second letter to Timothy (a verse which, incidentally, is closer to the spirit of the Kingdom than almost any other in the bible): 'If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him'.⁸ Jesus saw in his approaching death the will of his Father for him. He also saw it, possibly, as the only way left to him of impressing upon his followers the nature of his own claims, and of convincing others of the seriousness of his intent.⁹ His teaching on the renunciation of self was put characteristically in terms of the grain that has to die if it is to rise again; and after his death, the first and greatest of christian theologians expressed in terms of death and resurrection the nature of the christian's struggle to overcome sin and to live a more authentic existence. Jesus's death and resurrection, then, which had figured only marginally in his own teaching, became the model of christian existence, that which lends it point and purpose.

So the invitation of the divine king in the Exercises cannot fail to excite some response in the heart of the committed christian. 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?'¹⁰ If it was necessary for Christ, we feel, then it is

⁸ 2 Tim 2, 11ff.

⁹ See on this point, Fr Jacques Guillet's admirable book, *The Consciousness of Jesus* (New York, 1972), esp. chs 10 and 11.

¹⁰ Lk 24, 26.

going to be necessary in some degree for his followers: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'.¹¹ Small wonder that the denial of self should be understood by christians ever since as their share in the cross of their master. But I have two queries regarding the ignatian version of Christ's call: the *insignis* – if anyone wants to be *outstanding*. How far is the élitist spirituality that this implies faithful to the original call of Christ, who tells all his followers that they are to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect?

My second query concerns the motive of the imitation of Christ and of copying him in enduring injustice and contempt, and material as well as spiritual poverty. The desire to imitate Christ is certainly deep-rooted in christian spirituality, but just how biblical is it? St Luke was certainly obsessed with the need for material poverty, but even he nowhere suggests that Christ went out of his way to seek reproaches and injuries, or that his motive for embracing the cross was anything other than the readiness to accept the Father's will. This is a topic that merits a good deal of attention and discussion

The Vocation-Narrative

I do not propose at this point to analyse the form of the vocation-narrative in any detail.¹² For one thing, as found in the Old Testament, it regularly includes a protest on the part of the one called that he is unfit to undertake the work for which God has picked him out. And God or his messenger generally replies to this avowal of weakness by offering a sign. These elements are missing in the New Testament examples, which fall into three basic parts, the revelation, the commission and the promise. The main point of the story is of course to recount how a leader or prophet (Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Jeremiah) received his commission. But the opening revelation and the concluding promise are indispensable elements in the form: the one who is called must be able to rely both on what the Lord has done for his people in the past and on what he intends to do in the future.

In the Old Testament, naturally enough, the call always comes from God. In the New Testament (the call of Saul in Acts, for

¹¹ Mk 8, 34.

¹² Cf Habel, N.: 'The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives', in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965), pp 297–323.

example), it is Christ who reveals himself, issues commands and pledges assistance. As so often, the New Testament authors take it for granted that Christ now fills the role hitherto reserved for Yahweh. Instead of Yahweh, it is now Christ who gives the assurance which had seemed to belong exclusively to the revelation of Israel's God: 'I am with you'. Hebrew does not distinguish grammatically between 'I am' and 'I will be': hence the ambiguity of the revelation of the name of Yahweh to Moses, 'I am who am'.¹³ Subsequent episodes, such as the call of Joshua, confirm the nature of the revelation: 'I will be with you as I was with Moses; I will not leave you or desert you'.¹⁴ In one extraordinary passage Hosea is warned that the revelation of the name and with it the promise of assistance is to be withdrawn: 'You are not my people: for you *I am* not'.¹⁵ Finally, in a passage from the post-exilic prophet Haggai, the form of the call is modified to admit the promise of the Spirit: 'take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit abides among you; fear not'.¹⁶

The essence of the old form, revelation, promise and command, is summed up in the one word, *Emmanuel*, 'God with us'. Isaiah saw – and his insight is one of the most extraordinary in the history of prophecy – that the promise of divine assistance was somehow to be carried by a human being, the Messiah.¹⁷ The prophecy is recalled by Matthew in the annunciation (a form which has affinities with the call narrative), and in the conclusion of his gospel he shows how it is finally fulfilled: 'and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age'.¹⁸

In the exercise on the Kingdom, the implications of the Emmanuel promise are taken for granted. The personal presence of the king is absorbed into the invitation, whereas in the Old Testament vocation-narratives, as we saw, the promise of divine assistance is a guarantee consequent upon the commission. Ignatius makes no comment at this point; that in Jesus, God is visible, is a truth he assumes. So in every one of Jesus's calls, divine assistance is guaranteed. In the scriptural examples it belongs to the promise: '*You* are to do this; *I* will be with you'. In the Exercises it is included in the invitation: 'This is what *I* intend to accomplish; *you* are invited to accompany me'.

¹³ Exod 3, 14.

¹⁴ Jos 1, 5.

¹⁵ Hos 1, 9.

¹⁶ Hag 2, 4-5.

¹⁷ Cf Isai 7, 14.

¹⁸ Cf Mt 28, 20.

Of course it may be said that there is nothing particularly surprising in this. The gospels are full of stories of Jesus calling others to follow him, stories in which, naturally enough, there is no explicit promise of his personal assistance, since this is implied by the situation. But any commission that is to be carried out after Jesus's death is followed by a promise, veiled or otherwise, of divine help. In one case Jesus is calling men to follow him; in the other he is sending them out on their own, whilst at the same time guaranteeing that they will never go short of his help.

No doubt the situation is not quite as simple as this, since, as the form critics have underlined for us, the gospel stories concerning Jesus are invariably recounted with the early Church in mind. But the fact remains that Ignatius's approach is much closer to medieval works of piety like the *Imitation* than to the scriptures themselves. The physical presence of Christ is conjured up by the imagination, and the exercitant is invited to picture him issuing a personal call, much as he invited Peter and Andrew, James and John, or Levi the tax collector. The New Testament writers show no inclination to do this. True, Paul's relatively restrained account of his own call in Galatians¹⁹ is backed up elsewhere by references to visions and revelations;²⁰ but whatever the nature of Paul's experience, it was not an imaginative projection; and the same is true of the Lord's personal interventions in the Acts of the Apostles.

There is one theological advantage, however, in the ignatian method. As I have already suggested, the implications of the Incarnation become clear: the Son of God came to share our human condition, and the generosity and love thus displayed lie behind any invitation he addresses to others. This becomes especially clear in the preliminary parable of the human king: we are not to think of Christ as exhibiting in an especially high degree the qualities of the human king. The paradigm or prime analogue here is Christ;²¹ and the way in which God manifested his love in the Incarnation, the supreme example of unforced sharing, is somehow exhibited in the behaviour of the human king. He, by inviting others to share hardships along with him, is, like Christ, shaming them into acquiescence by the example of his own generosity.

¹⁹ 'When he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his Son to me . . .' (Gal 1, 16).

²⁰ 1 Cor 15, 5-8; 2 Cor 12, 1-6.

²¹ Fr Butterworth has independently arrived at the same conclusion and makes the same point in his paper, much more fully and effectively than I have been able to do.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to ask the following question: Is it possible to replace the myth or model of Christ's kingship by some equivalent model more in tune with modern attitudes and interests? What about Christ as Saviour or Redeemer, or Christ as Bridegroom? Well, although these models certainly have good scriptural authority, they do not seem to me to be particularly helpful today. As for Christ the divine Propagandist, or Christ the Wheeler-Dealer, these are models which could appeal only to people interested in plugging Christ for their own personal gain or to the incurably obtuse. It may be that somehow or other we have to include the concept of leadership in any model we finally adopt. And it seems in fact that the model of Christ as Leader was proposed in the thirties by Fr Martin D'Arcy as an acceptable substitute for that of Christ the King. But looking back, one finds it hard to forget that the thirties was the decade of the rise to power of *Der Führer*, *Il Duce* and *El Caudillo*. 'Leader' may not have quite the same overtones as these, but I don't like it very much as a title.

My own suggestions are three:

- (1) Christ the Man for All Seasons, the Man without a Title, the Friend and Companion, the one who shares our troubles and helps us to shoulder our burdens, the man whose vulnerability helps us to accept our own inadequacies and to sympathize with those of others.
- (2) Christ the Healer, the Reconciler, The Peacemaker, who neither breaks a bruised reed nor quenches a smouldering wick.²² Healing was an essential part of his own mission, and there is something Christ-like, we feel, in the work of hospital sisters and brothers. This exhibits, in very much the same way as Jesus's own healing-miracles did, the real nature of the Kingdom of God.
- (3) Christ the Revolutionary, the Outsider, questioning the accepted conventions of the society of his day, and upsetting and provoking the champions of those conventions; the man who kept bad company, the man whose preaching was so radical that it has not to this day been fully understood.

Not only are these suggestions much more solidly grounded in the gospels than Ignatius's picture of Christ the King; but they also have a much wider contemporary appeal. But in applying them we should bear two dangers in mind. The first is of forgetting (or at least of failing to take into account) the cosmic role of Christ. Jesus

²² Cf Mt 12, 20.

is the Lord: as well as an individual human being he is the master of creation. His authority is not just that of an attractive and dynamic personality – he speaks with the voice of God. The second danger is that of an over-hasty and immature response to what seems to be Christ's call, one that arises more from an unconscious urge to find an outlet for ill-satisfied aggressivity than from a self-giving generosity. There is evidence in Ignatius's own life of precisely this kind of immature response. It is presumably the task of the retreat-giver to ensure that any exercitant who proceeds as far as the Second Week should hear the voice of Christ with as little interference as possible. But just *how* he hears it is for God to decide.

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