

mind of God. If I suffer it means you have loved me; if I am set aside, it means you have hated me.

Remember the Church in Syria in your prayers, which in my place employs God as its shepherd; there is only Jesus Christ and your charity to be its bishop. I indeed am ashamed to be called one of them. I am not worthy of it, being the last and the least of them, an untimely birth. But I have been given the merciful chance of being somebody at last, if only I reach God.

My spirit greets you, and so does the charity of the Churches which have received me, and as no mere passing traveller either, in the name of Jesus Christ. Even those which lay off my road—physically speaking³—escorted me from one town to the next. I am writing this to you from Smyrna by the hand of the excellent Ephesians. With me, amongst many others, is Crocus, a name very dear to me. About those who have gone ahead of me from Syria to Rome to the glory of God, I trust you have been informed. Please let them know I am near. They all deserve well of God and of you—it is right that you should comfort them in every way you can. I have written this to you on the ninth day before the Calends of September (August 24th). Fare you well till the end, waiting patiently for Jesus Christ.



GAMALIEL

(Questions should be addressed to Gamaliel, c/o the Editor, THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, Hawkesyard Priory, Rugeley, Staffs.)

Q. I find the expression 'kingdom of God' or 'kingdom of heaven', as used by our Lord, extremely puzzling. It seems to be used in so many different ways. What precisely does it mean?

E.C.H.

A. It means nothing *precisely*. It is a great mistake to try and limit any biblical word or phrase to one precise meaning. Precision is a virtue in *measurement* but not necessarily so in language or in

³ Literally 'according to the flesh'. According to the spirit all the churches everywhere lay on his road, because spiritually speaking both his road and theirs was Christ, who said 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'.

thought. The phrase 'kingdom of God' has a whole range of meaning, like the keyboard of a piano, and is not miserably confined to one note like a penny whistle.

First of all I should point out that the English translation is apt to mislead. 'Kingdom' in English signifies primarily a territory ruled over by a king, secondarily a society or group occupying such a territory. I suppose it was feudalism, with its structure of land tenures, that gave words like 'kingdom', 'barony', and so forth their strong territorial bias. But the Greek word *basileia* which 'kingdom' is used in our Bibles to translate, and the Hebrew word *malkuth* that lies behind this, mean primarily the function or office of a king, his authority, his power—the best English translation would be 'sway' or 'kingship'; secondarily the exercise of such an office, or its duration—English 'reign'; thirdly and not very often the territory or group over which kingship is exercised—'kingdom'. There is one other observation on language to make; 'heaven' in the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' is simply a way of referring to God without mentioning his name. Just as 'heaven forbid' means exactly the same as 'God forbid', so 'the kingdom of heaven' means exactly the same as 'the kingdom of God'.

What we are concerned with then is what our Lord refers to as God's sway or kingship. It is not a phrase he invented, but one he found in use and adopted. Whatever it means, he began not by explaining it but by proclaiming it. 'And after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying "The time is accomplished, and the kingdom of God is at hand; Repent and believe the gospel"' (Mark i, 14-15). What Mark calls the gospel of God, Matthew (iv, 23) calls the gospel of the kingdom, which is a phrase that has crept into some versions of the text just quoted from St Mark. Whether the actual phrase is used or not, it is clear that the kingdom is what the gospel, the good news, is about.

We can gather from the same passage what God's kingship consists in, and why its proclamation is good news. It consists in the remission of sins; 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand'. John the Baptist, a few verses before, had come also making a proclamation, 'proclaiming the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins' (Mark i, 4). And St Matthew's way of putting it is, 'John the Baptist came making proclamation in the

desert of Judaea, saying "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. iii, 1-2). Our Lord puts it slightly differently in the sermon on the mount; 'Seek first the kingdom of God *and his justice*' (Matt. vi, 33). God's justice is the forgiveness of sins responding to man's repentance—or rather man's repentance responding to God's free gracious offer of forgiveness.

This kingship of God which our Lord proclaimed as being at hand was something the Jews were looking forward to in hope. It was an eschatological hope, that is one directed to the *eschaton*, the last things, the end, when God and his people would be finally vindicated, and God's sway over the world would be manifest, his dominion revealed in the destruction of sin and of all that withstands God, and the just would reign with God in perfect peace.

The kingship of God which our Lord proclaimed, and the apostles after him, is also an eschatological reality. It will only be fully established at the end, on the last day, in what our Lord calls the 'regeneration' or rebirth, that is the resurrection; 'Amen I tell you, that you who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man sits upon his throne of glory, shall also sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matt. xix, 28). It is identical in substance with 'the inheritance of eternal life' (ibid. 29). And so we still have to pray 'thy kingdom come'; it has not come yet, not fully. We still have to seek the kingdom of God and his justice. It has not been found yet in the world, not fully. To the Israelite way of thinking, and this is true of our Lord and the apostles and the early Church, God's kingdom cannot be said really to have come, until it is manifest, visible beyond all possibility of contradiction; and that is not the case as long as wickedness and the powers of darkness are still active in the world.

But yet the Christian expectation of the kingdom is different from that of Israel before Christ. We are expecting something that has already been granted to us, something that has already started to happen. The kingship of God has not yet been fully and openly established; but it has begun to be established, secretly, invisibly, yet really, in Christ. In Christ the kingdom of God has established a bridgehead in the kingdom of the world, it has started to infiltrate. So we get such phrases as 'the kingdom of God does not come with observation; behold the kingdom of

God is in your midst' (Luke xvii, 20). 'If I by the finger of God cast out devils, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Luke xi, 20).

The bridehead established through Christ in the world is the Church—that is the Church militant—and the Church is the kingdom of God in preparation. It is the kingdom of God in a true and real sense, but not in the full sense. The substance of the kingdom of God, as we have seen, is justice, the forgiveness of sins, peace, eternal life. Now in Christ we already have eternal life, really but not fully because not manifestly. St Thomas says that faith is *quaedam inchoatio*, a certain beginning in us of eternal life, of which we expect the *consummatio*, the completion, in the next life. So too the Church on earth, which is the context of faith, what St Paul calls the household of faith, the family of the faithful, may be called *quaedam inchoatio*, a certain beginning amongst us of the kingdom or kingship of God, really present, but not fully present in the world.

Two more points; does the 'kingship of God mean exactly the same as 'the kingship of Christ'? Substantially, yes; there is of course no opposition. But the two phrases are not, I think, simply interchangeable. St Paul talks of the day, the last day, when Christ shall hand over the kingdom to God and his Father, and God shall be all in all (I Cor. xv, 24). The kingdom of Christ, we might conclude from this, is the proper name for the kingdom of God in its present state of gradual realization—in other words, for the Church. The last day has not yet come, and yet, as St Paul also says, the ends of the ages have come upon us (I Cor. x, 11). We are living in that dawn of the age to come which the Rabbis called the days of the Messias. Ever since the death and resurrection of Christ the world has begun to come to its end.

A second point; what is our relationship to God's sway or kingship? Is it simply exercised over us, are we simply God's subjects? It is truer to say that God's kingship is exercised with us, we are destined to reign with Christ, which means that we have already begun to reign with Christ, really but not fully. Christ's kingdom is our kingdom, not merely because we belong to it as members, but also because it belongs to us as its kings.