The Kingdom of God

A. C. BOUQUET

Forty years ago, Arthur Clutton Brock, a Christian layman, and at the time Art Critic of the *Times* newspaper, drew attention to what he considered to be the neglect of Christian preachers and teachers to speak about that which, as he said, was the central feature in the message of Jesus, from beginning to end, namely the concept of the Kingdom of God. They might draw attention to one or more aspects of it, but they hardly ever treated it as a whole. It has always seemed to me that his criticism was just. Most of us are apt either to take the idea for granted, or to assume that it is only a convenient synonym for 'religion in general'. But that is just what it was not. And I venture here to try to express as simply as I can what it was; for I believe that the idea is fundamental in the message of Jesus, and that it is to be found fully developed nowhere else in the religions of the world, although I think that it is adumbrated in an elementary way in the sayings of the Chinese sage, Mo-ti, and certainly occurs as a derivative, though in a rather cramped and distorted form, in the proclamation of Mohammed.

Now let us start right from the foundations. The first mention we have of Jesus, in Mark 1, represents him as proclaiming 'God's reign is near', and the last event, in Acts 1, before his complete withdrawal, is of his 'revealing himself to them for forty days, and discussing the affairs of God's Realm'. (It will be noticed throughout that I am using the translation of Moffatt.) Further, the second petition in the Lord's Prayer is 'may Thy reign begin'. The word in each case for Reign or Realm is, in Greek, βασιλεία, and this carries us back to a curious episode in a Greek drama by Aristophanes, where the founder of a Utopia up in the air receives the βασιλεία, the sovereignty, in return for a treaty with the gods. And this play is, of course, a long way earlier than the time of Jesus, though it is significant that βασιλεία is represented by the dramatist as a beautiful woman, coming down, like the new Jerusalem from heaven, 'prepared as a bride for her husband'. So striking is the parallel that I can remember a reputable Cambridge Greek scholar of sixty years ago, seriously suggesting that Revelation 21 had been influenced by the same idea as that in the 'Birds' of Aristophanes.

But I must not wander from my subject. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and the word translated into Greek as βασιλεία is in

this Asian language Malkutha, and the Hebrew for 'kingdom of the heavens' would be 'Malkuth hashamayiur', which is a reverent way of speaking of the Reign of the Living God.

Now in the book of Daniel, a late work (and one which had hardly become canonical by the time of Jesus) written somewhere about 160 B.C. to encourage the Jews who were suffering persecution from Antiochus Epiphanes, we find the curious story of the great king of Babylon, who is afflicted with a temporary mental breakdown, and is deposed from his kingship until 'he knows that the Heavens do rule', and that 'the Most High reigns over the realm of men, and gives it to anyone whom He chooses'. This book of Daniel must clearly have been known to Jesus, and he seems to have identified Himself with 'The Man' spoken of in the seventh chapter, whose realm, a humane and spiritual one, succeeds that of the material empires, typified by the figures of a winged lion, a bear, a winged leopard with four heads, and a horrible ten-horned creature with huge iron teeth, all of them cruel and predatory sub-human monsters. 'The Man' comes from God, and of him it is said that he received 'dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all nations, races, and folk of every tongue, should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, never to pass away, and his kingdom never shall be overthrown'.

There can be no reasonable doubt that Jesus came to see Himself as 'the Man' of Daniel 7, and as inaugurating the Reign of God, a realm of universal membership and of eternal duration.

But it follows from this that His teaching throughout, as seen in the Gospel records, is concerned with showing people '*how* the Heavens do rule', while the few references we find outside the Gospels are an extension of the same teaching, as when we read in Acts 19:8 that Paul at Corinth spoke in the local synagogue over a period of three months 'fearlessly arguing and persuading people about the Reign of God', and in one of his epistles bursts out 'the Reign of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'—a statement which must sound very revolutionary to most orthodox Hindus, with their scrupulous care about with whom to eat and with whom not to eat, what kind of food is permitted, and what is forbidden.

Let us look then at the composite picture of the Reign or Commonwealth of God as we find it in the Gospels.

It is not a human contrivance. The Greeks thought of man as the artist of his own life, and Plato's *Republic* is a study, as we might say, in political theory, valuable in itself, but on a wholly secular basis. Man is the measure, and God is left out. For Jesus, the Commonwealth of God is given from above, 'prepared for you from the foundation of the world', and man's function is to prepare himself with the wedding-garment of God's grace, to inherit it. Its approach is sudden and unexpected, and may catch us off our guard, or sleeping, like the slothful porter, or the

foolish maids of honour at a wedding. The observant Jews (typical of the representatives of some forms of complicated institutional religion) may try to make it too hard for people to enter in; but their efforts will be in vain. They may end by finding themselves shut out, while many will come from the ends of the earth and 'recline with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (simple nomads) within the Realm. The quality and characteristics of the citizens of this commonwealth are depicted by Jesus in many of his *logia*. They are unworldly, spiritually poor, living in detachment from worldly possessions, not trusting in riches, pure in heart, ready to suffer persecution for righteousness' sake, manifesting a true *ahimsa*, peace-makers, humble-minded, hungering and thirsting for spiritual goodness, not acquisitive in the worldly sense, merciful, and in all things surpassing the righteousness of the legalists, for unless they do they will not even get inside the commonwealth. Jesus says that when his itinerant preachers go into a village and the people refuse to listen to them, they are to warn the inhabitants that at that fateful moment the Realm of God has drawn near to them—and they have rejected it. This, as we see, implies that the Malkutha is a dimension of being in which God's rule is accepted and perfectly observed, but that it impinges upon, and seeks to absorb the commonwealth of man. He who recognizes this, and sees the Malkutha as worth everything else in the world, will deem it the Pearl of Great Price, for which he will sell everything else; or the Treasure hid in a field, to gain which he will part with his patrimony. But the Malkutha is not an individual state of bliss, like Nirvana. It is a world of social relationships and social joys. It is compared to a vineyard and its staff of workers, who are treated on an equalitarian basis, and none of whom can *deserve* his wages, to an agricultural estate, to a great supper, to a wedding feast, and to a net with a multitude of fishes—of many diverse species. The penetration of this dimension of being into the realm of mankind is noiseless, secret, and associated with an inner dynamic. It is compared by Jesus to leaven or yeast in dough, and to seed growing underground. It does not come through *Parateresis*—a difficult Greek word which seems to mean the sort of superstitious devotion to detail satirized by Theophrastus in his 'Deisidaimonesteros', the very term used by Paul of the Athenians. The Deisidaimonesteros is always on the look out for omens, auspicious days, the position of the stars, and the possibility that he may have forgotten to perform some ceremony which renders him unclean, or have touched something or somebody which renders him untouchable. No, says Jesus, this is not true religion. Obedience to the Rule of God is something that goes on inside you. It is a mental attitude of love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, temperance, self-control—as St. Paul says. It calls for enterprise and resourcefulness on the part of those to whom the citizenship is offered. They are not to sit down, take their ease, eat, drink and be merry; nor are they to

keep their talents wrapped up in napkins, or buried in a safe-deposit.

But Jesus was conscious that He was only establishing this New Order at great cost. In Him, the Living God was risking and enduring the very gallows. That is the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the historical event of Calvary.

Jesus has just said that his kingdom is a spiritual one, not a militarist one; but he accepts the fact of his kingship. And Pilate, with strange irony, gives orders for his execution. He is to be crucified with a tri-lingual inscription acknowledging his kingship, and the Jews want it altered 'He *said* I am the King of the Jews etc.'. But Pilate refuses: 'What I have written, I have written'; and in his refusal speaks more truly than he knows. Meanwhile the penitent criminal beside Jesus acknowledges the King amidst all the horror of his humiliation; and Jesus answers that the Kingdom is not for some future return 'when the King shall enjoy his own again', but *now*. '*Today* thou shalt be with me in the garden of God.' Is it surprising that early Christians spoke (perhaps using an unusual version of Psalm 96:10): 'Tell it out among the nations that God hath reigned from the *tree*—the gallows'? Is it surprising that the officer in charge of the execution ended by saying: 'Truly this man was divine'?

I confess that I do not know any other religion in the world which has got anything approaching the grandeur and richness of all this; whatever may be true or false in other religions, here Christianity surpasses them all in its truth and splendour.

But there is yet more to be considered. Let us go back for a moment to Clutton Brock. Brock used to say that the spiritual dimension of the Kingdom was always impinging upon us, and that we had to be most careful not to reject it. It is, he would say quaintly, as real a thing as a cow in a field. Yet woe betide us if we miss it. He gave this example. As a small boy he once came to stay in a village. He was stupid and shy, and rather unfriendly. One day, as he walked down the village street, three children ran out of a garden nearby holding out flowers in their hands. They wanted to show him friendship, and this was their way of doing it. But he, being a stupid little boy, walked on and took no notice. Then he suddenly heard a scuffle and sobs, and he turned back. And he saw that the children had thrown the flowers on the ground, and were all in tears. 'At that moment', says Brock, 'I believe the Kingdom of God was offered me, *and I rejected it*. And the thought of my stupidity and loneliness has haunted me ever since.' Surely he was terribly correct. The Realm of God as a spiritual order is not far away, but as a dimension of being is always close to us and pressing upon us, offering us its citizenship. We need to be ever watchful so as not to miss the fellowship that may be offered to us.

But the converse is also true. While it is only 'in the heavenlies' that the citizenship is perfect and continuous, we are granted by God momentary experiences of it here and now. Let

me end with two examples, both taken from India—though I could match them from similar experiences in England, experiences of an ecstasy of joy and peace in believing past all comparison.

Three years ago I was privileged to take part as a guest in the annual commemoration of Charles Andrews, at St. Stephen's College, Delhi. Some will know that S. K. Rudra, in founding it, decreed that at sunset on the day, the College servants should sit down to a common meal, and be waited upon by the Principal and staff—*all breaking caste to do so.* And at that feast I found myself sitting between two sweepers, and all of us receiving our food from the Head of the House. At that moment I think for a brief space we were all lifted into 'the heavenlies', and knew the meaning of Malkutha, and its accompanying *koinonia* and *homonoia* (words current in Hellenistic Greek for fellowship and unity).

Then again. Not long ago I was in a State College in India, never mind where; and there was a small peon who ran messages between me and the head of the department. Actually I think he was rather a naughty boy; but I was told that he was an orphan, born and brought up in a slum, so I tried as far as I could to be friendly to him, though as *he* knew no English and *I* didn't know his mother-tongue, communication was somewhat difficult, and I felt that perhaps I had failed. And then suddenly one day this happened. He had brought me a sheaf of papers, for which I had to write a receipt, and while I was writing it I saw him watching me. Then he suddenly put his finger to my lips and pointed to himself. I knew nothing of Indian idiom, and felt rather puzzled. But as I handed him the receipt he suddenly put his arm round my neck and pressed my face against him, and then looking rather scared he said 'namaste' with folded hands, and bolted out of the room, evidently feeling that he had been too familiar.

I sat still for some minutes after he had gone, and then it dawned on me that at that moment, through a little Indian slum-boy, I had been offered the kingdom of God, and that God had spoken to me through his dumb-show.