

## **The Kingdom of God and the Passion for Justice**

**SMA Summer School, 7 July 2015**

### ***Introduction***

How do we sustain our commitment to justice? All of us here have committed our lives to the following of Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we are to continue the mission of Jesus. Unless our commitment to justice is deeply rooted in our following of Jesus, unless we understand the commitment to justice to be intrinsically linked to the mission of Jesus, then our commitment to justice will waver, weaken or be understood as something important but marginal to what we are called to do.

Gerry Hughes, the English Jesuit who became very well known for his book, *God of Surprises*, once said: "There is no such thing as a spirituality of justice, only a spirituality of the Gospels of which justice is an integral component," a sentiment I would wholeheartedly agree with.

If I may quote Fr Pedro Arrupe, SJ, in this SMA gathering:

*"Nothing is more practical than finding God,  
Than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.  
What you are in love with,  
What seizes your imagination, will affect everything,  
It will decide what will get you of bed in the morning,  
What you do with your evenings,  
How you spend your weekends,  
What you read, whom you know,  
What breaks your heart  
And what amazes you with joy and gratitude,  
Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything."*

### ***The Kingdom of God***

So what was Jesus about? Here I would like to share with you how I understand my commitment to justice as linked to the mission of Jesus.

Jesus didn't found a Church. Jesus was a prophet, prophets don't found institutions - they criticise the ones they already have.

But Jesus was more than a prophet. He was the Messiah. But Messiahs don't found Churches either. They found movements.

Jesus didn't come to attack the Jewish faith and to replace it with yet another faith. Jesus didn't come to criticise Jewish spirituality or forms of worship and to replace them with a different spirituality or different forms of worship. Jesus was a Jew, through and through, with a strong love for Judaism and a passion for the fulfilment of the promises that God had made to the Jewish people. The Messiah was the one that Israel had been awaiting all those years since Moses. The Messiah was to complete the Exodus which began with Moses, to finally liberate Israel from all that oppressed them, and lead them into the Kingdom over which God would rule for ever. And from Israel, finally, would come salvation for all the world; Israel's enemies would be vanquished and peace and justice would reign on earth. Jesus, the Messiah, came to fulfil the promises that God had made to Israel, not to abolish them.

So at the centre of Jesus' mission was his announcement that "**the Kingdom of God is at hand**"<sup>1</sup>. Finally, God's promises to Israel were now being fulfilled. If the role of the Church, and our role within the Church, is to complete the mission that Jesus began, then we have to ask: what did Jesus mean by "the Kingdom of God is at hand?"

If you ask most Christians what they mean by the Kingdom of God, they will say that the Kingdom of God exists in Heaven: that Jesus was a teacher who came to announce a moral code, a code which is timeless, and which all are to follow, and, if we do so, we will receive a reward in Heaven. God, then, is a judge who will welcome, and reward with a place in Heaven, those who keep the law, as given by Jesus, but will condemn and in some way punish or exclude those who do not keep the law. I would disagree with this understanding of the mission of Jesus. Such a spirituality is inward looking, self-centred: it is focused on myself, my goal - namely getting to heaven - and what I have to do to achieve that goal. But the spirituality of the Gospels is outward looking: it is focused on others and their needs, inviting us to forget ourselves, even to die to ourselves, for the sake of our brothers and sisters. The flaw in that dominant spirituality is that it fails to explain why Jesus was crucified. You don't get crucified for inviting people into a Kingdom after death.

But you might get crucified for inviting people into a Kingdom that begins here on earth. If you announce that a Kingdom is about to burst into this world, some people will take fright.

### *The Kingdom of Caesar v The Kingdom of God*

Two thousand years ago, there was a man who was called "Divine", "The Son of God", and "God from God". He was given titles such as "Lord", "Redeemer", "Liberator", "Saviour of the World" and "Prince of Peace." Who was that person? It was the Emperor, Caesar Augustus.

Caesar had conquered the known world; his victories over his enemies had saved the Empire from the turmoil of constant war and brought peace to the Roman Empire. This new world of peace was attributed to the Gods and Caesar was revered throughout the Empire as the one sent by God to bring peace to the world.

In a little corner of that empire, there came into being a small group of people who took the identity of the Roman Emperor and gave it to a Jewish peasant who had been crucified by the Emperor's representative, Pilate. Either this was a joke, intended to poke fun at Caesar, or it was high treason.

And the Emperor was not amused. The early Christians were persecuted, arrested, imprisoned and sometimes executed.

Those early Christians clearly understood that their King was not Caesar but the Risen Jesus; that the Kingdom which commanded their allegiance was not the Roman Empire but the Kingdom of God. For example, young Christian males refused to serve their time in the Roman army, as commanded by the law of the Empire, because the King they followed was Jesus who commanded a radical non-violence. Although they were often arrested for treason for refusing to obey Caesar, and sometimes executed, they stood firm in their refusal.

They understood that the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed was not a Kingdom that was only going to come at the end of time in Heaven, nor a "spiritual" Kingdom, but a Kingdom in which they were living, here and now, and which radically altered their life on earth.

When Matthew wrote his Gospel, he tells the story of three wise men who come to Jerusalem from the east. They asked:

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1 v 15

“Where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.” Matt 2 v 1-2.

Now Herod, Caesar’s representative in Galilee, was understandably upset and proceeded to slaughter all the male children under two years of age. According to Matthew’s story, he clearly understood Jesus to be a threat. Matthew makes no attempt to explain that Herod had perhaps misunderstood the wise men, that his reaction was totally unnecessary, and that Jesus was really a “spiritual” leader who posed no challenge to Herod or Caesar. On the contrary, Matthew’s story goes on to describe how the three wise men fell to their knees to do him homage and offered the gifts traditionally associated with royalty, gold, frankincense and myrrh.

When Luke was writing his Gospel, he describes Mary’s response to her cousin Elizabeth’s affirmation that her son Jesus was the Lord.

“The Almighty..... has used the power of his arm,  
He has routed the arrogant of heart,  
He has pulled down princes from their thrones,  
And raised high the lowly.  
He has filled the starving with good things,  
And sent the rich away empty.” Luke 1 v 46 -55

Again, Luke makes no attempt to explain that this is to be understood spiritually or metaphorically.

When John was writing his Gospel, as an old man who had reflected all his life on his years walking with Jesus, he describes Jesus last few hours in terms of kingship.

Pilate asks him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (John 18 v 33) Jesus does not rush in to deny it. Instead he says: Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews.” (John 18 v 36)

Did Jesus mean that his Kingdom was of another world, or did he mean that his Kingdom is *in* this world but not *of* it, much as an enclosed monastery of contemplative monks is *in* this world but not *of* it?

What finally made Pilate’s mind up was the crowd shouting: “If you set him free, you are no friend of Caesar’s; anyone who makes himself king is defying Caesar.” (John 19 v 12)

Pilate then brings Jesus out to the crowd: “Here is your King.” (John 19 v 14)

The crowd reply: “We have no King except Caesar.” (John 19 v 15)

The Gospels present Jesus as a King who poses a threat to the kings of this world such as Caesar and his representatives, Herod and Pilate. The Kingdom of God, proclaimed by Jesus, was understood to be a kingdom, here and now, in this world, but the way of life lived by those in the Kingdom of God was in stark contrast to the way of life lived in all the other kingdoms that were in existence.

Admittedly, Jesus sometimes refers to the Kingdom of God as a Kingdom in an afterlife. But for Jesus, as for Jewish spirituality, there was not the sharp discontinuity between the Kingdom in this life and the Kingdom in the next life that we understand today. There was a seamless transition from one to the other. The Messiah was to come, vanquish Israel’s enemies in this world, usher in, here and now in this world, the Kingdom over which God would reign, and this Kingdom would last for ever. Vatican II talks of both the continuity and the discontinuity between the Kingdom of God in this world, and the Kingdom of God in the next world: The Kingdom of God is already being built here in this world, and at the end of time, this Kingdom

will be taken by Jesus, now returned in glory, and, having been transformed and purified, will be handed over to the Father.

So we have to ask, when Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, was he talking primarily about the Kingdom of God in this world or the Kingdom of God in the next world? And just as importantly, who were the people Jesus talked to and what did they understand him to mean when he talked about the Kingdom of God?

### *The Kingdom of Caesar*

Jesus preached to the poor, the ordinary people. The rich lived in the cities and there is no record of Jesus ever going into the cities to preach, except once, he went to Jerusalem and we know what happened to him there! No, Jesus preached in the towns and villages and country side of Galilee where the ordinary, poor people lived, people who struggled to pay their taxes, to feed their families – the nobodies of his society. They were living in the Kingdom of Caesar, which Herod had been appointed to keep control of the territory on behalf of Caesar, which Herod did with utter ruthlessness. Herod had no problem slaughtering all the male children under the age of two, one of whom, he had been told, would become King of Israel and was therefore a threat to his position. A few years before Jesus was born, Herod had burnt forty Jews to death for trying to lead a protest against Roman occupation. When Jesus was three or four years old, still learning to walk, two thousand Jews were crucified in the city of Sepphoris, only about five miles from Nazareth where Jesus was living, and its inhabitants led off into slavery, as a reprisal for an attempted revolt against Caesar. Life had little value in Caesar's Kingdom; it was totally dependent on the whim of Caesar or his representatives.

Jesus came to live amongst a people who were cruelly oppressed by Caesar and his Empire.

He also came to a people where the vast majority lived at a subsistence level. They lived from day to day, never sure where tomorrow's food would come from. When Jesus asked them to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread," this was a real prayer for them, as it is today for those millions living on the edge of starvation. For most of us, however, it is a prayer whose meaning is purely metaphorical.

Many also lived on the edge of destitution: those with infirmities, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, lepers. They had no life, they simply survived from day to day, forced to beg just to stay alive, a very precarious existence.

Others were rejected and unwanted and marginalised: those who were considered to be sinners, with no regard for the Law. They were despised and ostracised.

A small minority, perhaps 7-8%, lived lives of ostentatious wealth, living in mansions, with no concern for the poor and the hungry around them. These were the royal court, the priests and religious aristocracy who became wealthy through the buying and selling of sacrificial offerings in the Temple, the rich landowners, many of them Herod's friends, who had accumulated large tracts of land by the simple policy of confiscating land from small landowners, often on the pretext that they were unable to pay the exorbitant tax that Herod demanded of them. But Herod didn't need much pretext, he had absolute power to do whatever he wanted, and there was no court of appeal.

This was God's chosen people, oppressed both from without and from within, struggling to survive and to maintain any sense of their own dignity: rejected by their fellow human beings and told that they had also been rejected by God. This was not what God had in mind when God

liberated the people from Egypt and led them into the promised land. This was not a people over whom God could possibly want to reign.

### *The Kingdom of God*

And Jesus came proclaiming a new Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, over whom God would happily reign. This new Kingdom was to be the fulfilment of the promises God made to Israel, the final, definitive liberation of God's people. And Jesus told people stories about this new Kingdom of God that was coming.

Jesus talked about the rich man<sup>2</sup> "who feasted sumptuously every day and was dressed in the finest linen" and who couldn't even be bothered to gather up the crumbs that fell from his table to give them to the poor man at his gate. The people Jesus was talking to knew exactly, some from their own experience, what he was talking about. And when Jesus went on to say that the rich man would be cast down to Hades and Lazarus would be welcomed into the Kingdom of God, you can imagine them looking at one another and nodding their heads in approval. Their own religious leaders were telling them that there would be no place for them in God's kingdom because they had been rejected by the God of the Law, and here was Jesus telling them about a God, a God of compassion, who would welcome them into God's Kingdom. When Jesus declared that in the Kingdom of God that was on its way: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first," they thought of the rich and respectable who considered themselves better than the poor and the infirm, and they were overjoyed. No wonder they could listen to him all day. This was indeed good news to the poor and rejected.

And when Jesus talked about the rich landowner<sup>3</sup> who had a massive harvest and said to himself: "What I am to do? I know, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones" without any consideration for those around him who were hungry, the people Jesus was talking to knew exactly what part of town these guys lived in. And when Jesus said that God is going to require his soul tonight, you can imagine them smiling with approval. This was indeed a God they would want to believe in.

And when Jesus talked about the large landowner<sup>4</sup> who sent his servants to collect his share of the produce from his tenants (often demanding as much as half of the produce of the land) and the tenants beat the servants and sent them off, they must have applauded loudly. (Now the Gospel writers have made this story into an allegory, where the large landowner is God, the servants are the prophets and the son, whom they put to death, is Jesus, but almost certainly the original story that Jesus must have told many times was the story of the exploitation of the tenants by the large landowners).

These were not "made-up" stories; Jesus was telling it as it was. And he was telling them that, in the Kingdom of God that was coming, their lives were going to be very different.

And when Jesus talked about the labourers<sup>5</sup> who waiting in the market square all day, hoping to get a few hours work, they knew exactly what Jesus was talking about: some of them, no doubt, had "been there, done that". And when Jesus said that even those who were given work at the eleventh hour also received the same wage, one denarius - enough to feed their family for the day - they were astounded; they never heard of any rich vineyard owner doing such a thing. A rich landowner who actually cared whether his workers had enough food or not! And when Jesus tells them that the rich vineyard owner is like God, they are filled with wonder; could God really be a

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 16 v 19-31

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12 v 13-21

<sup>4</sup> Matt 21 v 33-46

<sup>5</sup> Matt 20 v 1-16

God that cares, that cares about them and whether their families will get fed? They want to hear more about this wonderful God.

But Jesus didn't just *tell* people about the God of compassion. When Jesus healed the blind and the lame and the lepers, who were told by their own religious leaders that they were cursed by God, in the very act of being healed they *experienced* the God of compassion that Jesus revealed. This was a God beyond all their expectations. No wonder those who were cured went off and told everyone what Jesus had done, even when Jesus had instructed them to tell no-one<sup>6</sup>. How could you not go and tell everyone about this God of compassion and love?

And when Jesus ate with sinners<sup>7</sup>, who were told by their own religious leaders that they were forsaken by the God of the Law, in their table fellowship with Jesus they *experienced* the unconditional forgiveness of the God of compassion. This was not just "Good News," this was extraordinary news, beyond all their expectations.

And when Jesus reached out, in friendship, to the unwanted and marginalised, who were told by their own religious leaders that God had rejected them, they *experienced* God's acceptance of them. This is what they had not even dared to hope for, and now it was becoming a reality for them.

And Jesus tells them the story of the Pharisee<sup>8</sup>, who reminded God of all his merits and good works, and the Publican, who had no good deeds to present to God. When Jesus announces that the Publican, not the Pharisee, went home more justified before God, they were given a hope and encouragement which they had never experienced before.

And when the rich young man<sup>9</sup> wants to follow Jesus, he is told that he must first share his wealth with the poor. When he is unable to do so, he is sent away, sad. You can hear some heckler in the audience shouting up: "Good for you, Jesus. That guy doesn't care about us. He cannot be part of our Kingdom."

Everywhere Jesus went, he was followed by large crowds. Five thousand people, not counting women and children, listened to him all day long, even forgetting that they were hungry<sup>10</sup>. Every town he went into, the whole town, we are told, turned out to hear him<sup>11</sup>. The poor man who was paralysed and wanted Jesus to cure him couldn't get near Jesus because of the crowds<sup>12</sup>. "Large crowds followed him, coming from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judaea and Transjordan,"<sup>13</sup> the Gospel writers tell us. They – the nobodies of his society – were enthused by what he was saying and couldn't get enough of him. It was the poor, the hungry, the rejected who flocked after Jesus to listen to him, to listen to Jesus telling them that a new Kingdom was at hand, the Kingdom of God, where they would be ruled by a God who was compassion itself. This God was pained by their poverty, their hunger, their suffering, their marginalisation and offered them new life in the Kingdom of God. In this Kingdom that was coming, the God of compassion would ensure that their poverty, their hunger and their suffering would be eliminated. They would be welcomed and respected and valued and their dignity as children of God acknowledged. This was not just "Good News to the Poor," this was extraordinary news. No wonder Jesus was always surrounded by crowds, who hung on his every word.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 1 v 44-45

<sup>7</sup> Matt 9 v 9-13

<sup>8</sup> Luke 18 v 9-14

<sup>9</sup> Luke 18 v 18 - 23

<sup>10</sup> Luke 9 v 10-17

<sup>11</sup> Mark 2 v 2.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 5 v 17-26

<sup>13</sup> Matt 4 v 25

The rich and the powerful – the somebodies of his society – amongst whom were to be found the Pharisees, the scribes, the lawyers and the priests, also occasionally listened to what Jesus was saying. But their response was to “go away and plot how to get rid of him.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, what Jesus was saying was not irrelevant to the ordinary, poor, sick, and outcast people who came to listen to him in their thousands; they were enthused by what he was saying and couldn’t get enough of him. Clearly, also, what Jesus was saying was not irrelevant to the rich and powerful because they were infuriated by what he was saying and quickly had quite enough of him.

Jesus is telling those who came to listen about a Kingdom where those on the margins of society will be welcomed, respected, and valued instead of being rejected, and unwanted; where people will reach out to the poor, and share what they have, so that their needs will be met, instead of being ignored and despised by those who had the resources to meet their needs. This was Good News to the poor but Bad News to the rich and powerful. In this new Kingdom, people will live in a totally different way to the way they now had to live, people will live by totally different values to the values of the society around them. In this new Kingdom, their King will be, not the brutal Herod or the warmongering Caesar, but God, a God of compassion, a God who cares.

The God who liberated the people from their oppression in Pharaoh’s Kingdom is now coming, indeed has already come, to liberate the people once again, this time from their suffering in Caesar’s Kingdom, which oppressed them with the collusion of the priests and religious aristocracy.

### ***The God of the Law and the God of Compassion***

Many say that what Pope Francis is saying and doing does not represent a new direction for the Church; that he is simply putting on more attractive clothes over the same old body. I disagree. I believe that what he is doing is a fundamental, and irreversible, change for the Church. For too long, the Church has proclaimed a God of the Law, a God whose passion is the observance of the law, and has been telling us that our relationship with God is determined by how we observe the law. A God of the Law is, necessarily, a God who is a Judge, who rewards and welcomes those who keep the law but punishes and condemns those who do not keep the law. A God of the Law is a God who excludes the sinner.

But thousands of people didn’t follow Jesus to hear him giving them new laws or reinforcing old laws. No, they were sick of being oppressed by a multiplicity of laws, loaded on their shoulders by their own religious leaders. No, they came to hear Jesus talking about a God who is compassion, who, instead of excluding the sinner, reaches out to the sinner.

Like Jesus, everywhere Pope Francis goes huge crowds turn out to listen to him. On the beach at Rio, 3 million young people came to hear him. In Manila, over 6 million came to hear him saying Mass.

They didn’t come to listen to Pope Francis laying down laws and preaching a God who will judge them by their observance of law.

No. Pope Francis, by what he is saying and doing, is bringing us back to that gospel message of Jesus, that our God is a God whose passion is compassion. This is both a fundamental change of direction for the Church, but it is also irreversible; while we, who are in our later years of life, have been brought up to believe in a God who lays down laws and demands that we obey them or face the consequences, young people today are simply not interested in such a God, a God of the law, a God who judges them, and rightly so. Those young people who are walking away from the Church, disinterested, are the prophets of today, telling the Church that there is something

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<sup>14</sup> Matt 12 v14

fundamentally wrong with the message which our Church preaches; but as always with the prophets, the Church attacks the messenger, blames them for straying from the Church and asking for prayers that that they will see sense and return some day.

This clash between the God of the law and the God of compassion ultimately led to the death of Jesus.

For the religious authorities at the time of Jesus, God was a God of the Law. God desires, above all else, that the people of God should obey the Law.

The religious authorities had good justification for this understanding of God. Their faith told them that God had heard the cries of the people enslaved in Egypt, they had called on God to rescue them from their oppression by the Pharaoh. And God heard their cries and sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt. And God made a covenant with the people: on God's part, God promised to protect them always and to lead them into the promised land; but on their part, they must obey the laws which God was giving them through Moses. These laws instructed them how to live in right relationship with God and with each other: God would be their God and they were to live in justice and peace with each other according to the Law of the Covenant. When Israel was invaded by foreign armies, and the people led off again in slavery and scattered to the far corners of the world, the people of God understood that this had happened because they had been unfaithful to the laws of the Covenant. Failure to keep the law, as given by God, meant that the people of God would have torn up the Covenant and God might therefore abandon them. So the focus of all religious instruction was the Law, the meaning of the Law, the details of the Law. God's passion was the observance of the Law. If the people failed to keep the Law of God, then dire consequences could be expected to follow. So sinners had to be rejected and excluded.

Then along came Jesus who proclaimed a God who reached out to sinners, who welcomed them, who ate with them. This was dangerous stuff. And coming from a layman, a carpenter's son! Jesus was seen as a dangerous, deluded religious leader who posed a serious threat to the true faith of the people. And crowds of people were following him, hanging on his every word. If this continued, God's wrath would be aroused. The religious authorities had a responsibility, given to them by their God, the God of the law, to get rid of Jesus.

Today, the same clash between the God of the law and the God of compassion continues. We saw it at the Synod on the family, where Bishops were divided between those who believe that God is a God of compassion who wishes to reach out to those who are gay, or who are divorced and remarried, and those who believe that God is a God of the law who insists on excluding them for their failure to observe the law of God. Like the religious authorities of Jesus' time, they believed that any dilution of the law of the Church would be a betrayal of the God they believe in. Pope Francis, like Jesus, is a cause of division amongst religious-minded people, some of whom see him as the right person for this time in the Church, others as a danger to the integrity of the Church's moral teaching.

Pope Francis, when asked who he is, replied, "I am a sinner." He replied with a conviction which suggests that he is not just uttering pious platitudes. Only those who appreciate that they are sinners can truly welcome a God-whose-passion-is-compassion. The God-whose-passion-is-observance-of-the-Law offers only condemnation to sinners. Sinners cannot rely on their good works to save them, for they have none; they depend on God's compassion. To them, the God that Jesus revealed was, indeed, good news, for it opened the Kingdom of God to them. That Kingdom had been firmly closed to them by the God of the law, who rewards the good and punishes the wicked.

Those who believe themselves to be righteous, however, prefer to believe in a God of the law. They have most to gain from such a God, who, they believe, will give them their just reward in the next life. The God of compassion appears to undervalue all their efforts to live a good life, as these may count for nothing in the next life.

Hence, Jesus was welcomed enthusiastically by many who believed themselves to be rejected by God, but was rejected by many who believed themselves to be righteous. The God that Jesus revealed was good news to sinners, but bad news for the righteous, who instead of getting some reward from God for their efforts, saw sinners getting the same welcome from God as themselves.

The chief priests and the elders, who believed that the God of the law owed them a place in the Kingdom as a reward for their righteous living, were furious when Jesus told them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”<sup>15</sup> This God of compassion was just too much to take!

How do you preach a God of the Law? Why, you get scholars to study the Law, and examine all the different situations in which the Law might apply, and then you tell people what they are supposed to do. You can preach the God of the Law from an ivory tower, surrounded by your learned books. Any resemblance to the Holy Roman Catholic Church is purely intentional!

But you cannot preach the God of compassion in that way. You cannot preach the God of compassion from a pulpit. To preach the God of compassion, you have to *be* the compassion of God. Therefore you can only preach the God of compassion if, like Jesus, you are immersed in the poverty and suffering, the homelessness and hopelessness of people around you. It is that real poverty and suffering, that real experience of homelessness and hopelessness that the God of compassion addresses. And so to understand the revelation of Jesus, that God is compassion, we cannot disconnect Jesus from the society into which he was born, and in which he lived and died. We have to look at the suffering of the people of that time, and the economic, social and political conditions which caused that suffering, just as we have to do today, if we are to preach a God of compassion. Perhaps we have disconnected Jesus from the real, concrete suffering of the people of his time, because it challenges us to connect with the real, concrete suffering of our time.

So Jesus came proclaiming a new Kingdom where the poor and the sinner will be welcomed and their needs will be met.

So people wanted to know: where was this new Kingdom to be found? And what did they have to do to enter this Kingdom?

### ***The early Christian community***

The early Christian community, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, understood that in their community the Kingdom of God that Jesus had promised was now present in the world. Their community was to continue the mission of Jesus, to reveal the God of compassion, who ruled over their community, by *being* the compassion of God to each other and to the world. The way of life of this Christian community caused such astonishment to the pagans that their spontaneous response was: “See how they love one another.” Their leader and King, the one they followed, the model for their life together, was the risen Jesus, Son of God, who continued to be present amongst them. I read the Gospels now, not as instructions to me as to how I should live my life according to the moral laws of God which Jesus revealed, but as instructions to the early Christian community – and therefore to us, as the Christian community in our time – as to how we are to live together in order to be the Kingdom of God on earth.

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<sup>15</sup> Matt 21 v 31

## *A community of radical solidarity*

And so I read the story of the feeding of the five thousand people. Five thousand people spent the whole day listening to Jesus. In the evening, the disciples had to go up to Jesus and say: “Jesus, would you ever shut up! The people are hungry. Send them off to the towns and villages around, so that they can get something to eat.” The whole point of the story, for the early Christian community, lies in Jesus’ answer to the disciples:

“No, you give them something to eat yourselves.”<sup>16</sup>

The Christian community understood that this was an instruction from Jesus to them. They were to ensure that they reached out to those amongst them who were in need and not leave their needs unmet.

The Kingdom of God is where God lives, where God is to be found. In the famous Last Judgement scene<sup>17</sup>, we read:

“I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was in hospital and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to see me. Welcome into the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

Perhaps Matthew is not talking about judgement at all. Perhaps Matthew is describing *a community where God is present*. A community which reaches out to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, in other words, to meet the needs of all, a community which expresses the compassion of God in its life together, is a community where you will find present the God of compassion. “Welcome into the Kingdom.”

But a community which fails to reach out to meet the needs of all is a community where God, the God of compassion, is absent.

“I was hungry and you did not give me to eat, I was thirsty and you did not give me to drink, I was naked and you did not clothe me, I was in hospital and in prison and you did not visit me... depart from me.”

The early Christians understood that, to enter the Christian community, the Kingdom of God, a person took on the responsibility of being the compassion of God to one other. Hence, they were to live together in radical solidarity with each other, loving each other with a love that was willing to share everything for the sake of those in need. Just as Jesus had given up everything, including what was most precious to him, his own life, for our sake, so they, as followers of Jesus were to be prepared to give up everything, even what may be most precious to them, for the sake of their brothers and sisters. They understood that all they had were gifts, given to them by God, not so that they could have a good life and enjoy themselves, (like the guy in the Kingdom of Caesar who built bigger barns to store his harvest) but so that they (now living in the Kingdom of God) could use them for the benefit of others. They were, therefore, to share their resources, their time, their talents, their skills for the sake of those who needed them. And so the rich young man, a good young man, a young man who had kept all the commandments from his youth, whom, we are told, “Jesus looked on him and loved him”<sup>18</sup>, nevertheless, he could not become a follower of Jesus, could not be admitted to the early Christian community, because his unwillingness to share what he had for the sake of those in need was a contradiction to everything that Jesus lived and preached, an obstacle to revealing a God of compassion by being the compassion of God.

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 9 v 13

<sup>17</sup> Matt 25 v 31-46

<sup>18</sup> Mark 10 v 21

## *A community of radical inclusiveness*

One of the characteristics of Jesus' life that was remembered and passed down from generation to generation of Christians in those early communities was the fact that Jesus shared table fellowship with sinners.

**“Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.”<sup>19</sup>**

This caused Jesus endless difficulties. “How could this man be from God, when he associates with the enemies of God, those who do not keep the Law?” righteous people, good living people, asked. The God of the Law cannot tolerate the actions of the God of compassion.

How would the early Christian community understand these words when they heard them read at the Sunday Eucharist? Jesus they knew to be God; God eating would bring to mind the Kingdom of God in Heaven, which was often portrayed as a meal at which God presides.

**“Master, who shall be at the feast in the Kingdom of God?”** (Luke 14 v 15)

And who will be present at that meal? Why, those who were excluded and unwanted here on earth in the Kingdom of Caesar. And so they reasoned, if they will be welcomed amongst God's guests in the Kingdom of God in Heaven, then they should also be welcomed in their community, the Kingdom of God on earth.

The early community understood that this radical inclusiveness, revealed by the actions of Jesus, was normative for their community and life together. In their community, no-one was to be unwanted, rejected or marginalised. Everyone has the same dignity of being a child of God and that dignity was to be recognised and affirmed by the way in which the Christian community reached out to them and accepted them.

There were other characteristics of this community which we do not have time to elaborate here: it was to be a community of radical non-violence, a community where leadership and power were to be used, not for one's own self-interest, but for the common good, a community where all are equal, except the leader of the community, the Risen Jesus.

This community, the Kingdom of God on earth, is totally different to all other Kingdoms on earth. This community had a missionary mandate: **“Go, make disciples of all nations.”<sup>20</sup>** It therefore posed a threat to the wealthy and powerful of those other kingdoms.

## ***Conclusion***

Martin Luther King had a dream. He dreamt of an America where black and white people would live together in mutual respect and equality. But there were those who did not want see his dream become reality and they killed him.

Nelson Mandela had a dream. He dreamt of a South Africa where black people would no longer be oppressed and condemned to poverty and powerlessness. But there were those who did not want to see his dream become reality and they locked him up in prison for most of his life.

Tens of thousands of social and political activists around the world had a dream. They dreamt that their people would no longer be oppressed and condemned to poverty and powerless. But there were those who did not want to see their dreams become reality and many of them were arrested, tortured, killed and disappeared.

Jesus too had a dream. His dream was God's dream. He dreamt that all people would live together as one family, God's family. In a family of four children, the parents do not give three of the children a nice steak for their dinner, and give the fourth child bread and jam; no, everyone shares what little they may have. Yet that is what the family of God does to one billion people on

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<sup>19</sup> Matt 9 v 9 -13

<sup>20</sup> Matt 28 v19

our planet who live on the edge of destitution. This is not how God wants God's family to live. In a family of four children, the parents do not give three of the children a nice warm bed to sleep in and tell the fourth child to sleep outside on the porch. This is not how God wants God's family to live. No, the children share whatever rooms they have in the house. Yet that is what the family of God does to homeless people in every city of our world.

Jesus dreamt that all people would love each other, care for each other, share with each other, respect each other. He dreamt of a world where no-one would be hungry and have nothing to eat, where no-one would be thirsty and have nothing to drink, where no-one would be naked and have nothing to wear, where no-one would be sick and have no-one to visit them, where no-one would be in prison and rejected by their community (Matt 25). Jesus called his dream "The Kingdom of God." He was put to death by the religious and political leaders who did not want to see his dream become reality. He was put to death by those who did not want to share their wealth with the poor, by those who wanted to hold on to power for their own self-interests, by those who objected to the tax collectors, the prostitutes and the sinners, refusing to associate with them and pushing them to the margins of society.

What unites us as Christians is not that we obey certain laws and rules or worship God in particular ways. What unites us as Christians is that we share this dream of Jesus. To declare ourselves as followers of Jesus is to announce to the world that we have committed our lives to building this dream that Jesus passed on to us. This passion for building a world of justice and peace, in which all people live together as God's people, is the distinguishing characteristic by which Jesus wanted his followers to be identified. **"By this shall all know that you are my disciples, by your love for one another."**

Now, as then, there are many who do not want this dream to become reality. There are those who accumulate the world's wealth to themselves, while one billion people live in destitution. There are those who abuse their power for their own self-serving interests while people wait in poverty and powerlessness for the changes which could transform their lives but which those in power resist. There are those who will not reach out to the homeless, the drug user, the prisoner, those in social housing, but will reject them, want nothing to do with them and push them to the margins of their society. Those who commit themselves to building God's dream will face opposition, ridicule and rejection, as Jesus once did. Today there are more civilised ways of crucifying people: we will be labelled 'idealists', or 'Marxists,' be told to 'live in the real world' and not 'in dreamland.' But we Christians do live in dreamland, we live in God's dreamland.

But the crucifixion, then as now, isn't just the inevitable *consequence* of dreaming of a new world that challenges those who want their old world to remain. The crucifixion *is* the road, the only road, which can make this dream come true. The crucifixion of Jesus was the total self-giving of Jesus for our sake, so that we might have life. Today, as then, God's dream can only be realized through the same total self-giving of those who dream that dream, through the same radically selfless love that is willing to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others. A just world cannot be built through economic growth alone; it can only be built by the self-sacrifice of those whose passion is compassion, who are willing to care and share what they have and who they are, who are prepared to "lose their life" so that others may live. All religions call on their followers to love one another. But we Christians are the ones who have heard the call "to love one another *as I have loved you.*" Jesus gave his life for our sake; to follow him is to accept his invitation to give our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters.

Jesus had a dream. Does the Church today share that dream, or has it, in the harsh reality of contemporary life, forgotten the dream? Perhaps Pope Francis is calling us again to live in, and for, God's dream.

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