

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE COMING KINGDOM

Notes of a Theological Lecture

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The announcements of the Kingdom by John the Baptist, by Christ Himself, and by the Apostles, have certain elements in common. All three saw the coming Kingdom in the context of certain prevailing expectations among the people of Israel, which have their roots in the Old Testament, but which took more precise shape and form in what we call the inter-Testamental period.

The most dominant of these ideas is that of the impending judgment. John the Baptist, after having announced "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand", goes on to say to the religious leaders of Israel:

"You brood of venomous vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits a return to righteousness (*theshubah*)... He who is coming after me has the winnowing fork in his hand, he will now sort out his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into the granary, the chaff being burnt with unquenchable fire." (Mt. 3. 7, 8, 11, 12).

In Jesus' teaching, especially immediately before his crucifixion, the theme of judgment comes to the centre. His upbraiding of the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida (Mt. 11."20ff.) has this clear eschatological reference: "I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you". Many of his parables have a direct reference to the day of reckoning.

The apostolic kerygma was equally replete with the theme of the judgment day. Peter's preaching, especially after his acceptance of the heart of the Gospel as including the Gentiles, testifies that Christ "is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10. 42). The early epistles of Paul are full of the theme of the last day.

Qumran documents

This theme of judgment has its background in the life of the Qumran communities, as well as in the apocalyptic expectations of the Jewish people in general. The Qumran documents and the apocalyptic literature agree in relating judgment to righteousness. It is common knowledge now that the Qumran Community' looked forward to the Teacher of Righteousness and the Day of Judgment. When Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as a "teacher from God", he is identifying him

as the "right teacher" expected by the Qumran people.

Of all the New Testament books, that which expresses the Qumran spirituality best is the epistle of St. James. It was a democratic socialistic community with an intense corporate discipline. It was not, however, an academic socialism, but one with a burning prophetic passion:

"Come on now, you plutocrats, weep and lament and howl for the retribution that is coming to you. Rotten is your money; your rich sumptuous clothing has become moth-eaten; your gold and silver have become corroded, and their corrosion will be incriminating evidence against you; it will eat up your flesh like fire. You have been hoarding unto the last day of judgment. The withheld wages of those who have-toiled on your fields of which you exploited them will cry out against you and the cries of oppression of those who have harvested your fields for you have reached the laws of the Lord of Hosts. You have lived in pleasure and luxury on the earth, fattening yourselves at the slaughter of the poor. You have been quick to condemn and have not hesitated to kill the righteous man who protested: he was unable to stand up to you." (James 5. 1-6).

That is the kind of righteousness about which the Qumran Communities spoke, which John the Baptist preached, and which Jesus announced in his good tidings to the poor. When we individualize and interiorize and theologize this righteousness into a personal thing which one receives as a free gift of God by some celestial book-keeping feat, we are taking away the true fervour of the faith which broke out of the desert and turned the world upside down. James the Righteous, as he was called, and the fiery John the Baptist are the symbols of the Qumran Community, the matrix of the Christian faith.

The Qumran Community, however, cannot be compared to any ordinary radical revolutionary party of our time. Their ability to combine the passion for social righteousness (the hunger and thirst for righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount is a typical Qumran attitude) with an equally intense discipline of personal and community worship characterized these communities of the Dead Sea.

Their passion for social righteousness was an integral part of their life of worship. They were exclusivistic of those outside their community. This aspect of their life we cannot emulate in our time. But the dialectic between the deep sense of participation in a "heavenly community" and the passionate thirst for righteousness renewing the face of the earth should provide a critique of many current attempts to choose between the two.

The element of social renewal of this world combined with a "mystic" sense of participation in the "other" world is illustrated in the following passages from the Dead Sea Scriptures:

(a) The Hymn of the Initiants. This was probably sung at the time of initiation of new members into the Qumran Community. The Manual of Discipline has this in the hymn at the end of the rules:

*The reliability of God is the rock on which I stand
His power is the staff of my right hand \\
My discernment has its source in his righteousness \\
His marvellous mysteries have kindled a light in my heart. \\
Mine eye has gazed on that which is eternal
Sound wisdom, knowledge hidden from men,
A discreet prudence hid from the sons of men,
A Source of righteousness and a reservoir of power v
A spring of glory hidden from the Company of flesh
These God has granted to his Chosen for eternal possession
An inheritance - a share in the heritage of the holy ones
With the Sons of heaven he has merged their company
For a Council of unity, a Community, a holy building
An eternal planting, for all ages to come.*

(b) *"I will set a sober limit to all defending of faith and exacting of justice by force. I will bound God's righteousness by the measuring-line of occasion. I will temper justice with mercy, will show kindness to men downtrodden, bring firmness to fearful hearts, discernment to spirits that stray... 1*

(c) *"What is going to happen is, as it were, that all iniquity is going to be shut up in the womb and prevented from coming to birth. Wrong is going to depart before Right, as darkness departs before light. As smoke disappears and is no more, so will wrong disappear for ever. But Right will be revealed like the sun. The world will rest on a sound foundation... The world will be filled with knowledge, and ignorance exist no more." The Coming Doom.2*

Man himself was regarded as a field for good and evil, not as sinful or righteous by nature.

"He (God) created man to have dominion of the world, and made for him two spirits, that he might walk by them until the appointed time of his visitation; they are the spirits of truth and of error," says the Manual of Discipline.

It goes on to say that on the day of judgment, God will give the victory to the Sons of Light, who follow the Angel of Light and walk in his ways. The final day is when the Sons of Light challenge the Sons of Darkness to direct combat, led by the Teacher of Righteousness.

Teachings of Jesus

Jesus' own mission has to be understood in this context of challenging the Prince of Darkness in

his own domain -- the desert. The temptation narrative is the account of the first challenge to Belial or Beel-zebub. The casting out of demons in the Gospels has to be seen in this context of a war with the Angel of Darkness. The Cross is the temporary overcoming of the Teacher of Righteousness by the Prince of Darkness foretold (see Hymn J in the Hymn Scroll). The Resurrection is the final triumph of the Prince of Light who is given the victory by God.

The Synagogue declaration in Nazareth (Lk. 4. 16-21), which announced the Messianic task, and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5, 6, 7) or on the level ground (Lk. 6. 17 ff.), are both to be understood as platform addresses of the Kingdom. It is good news to the poor because it is a manifesto of liberation from:

- (a) captivity and enslavement,
- (b) blindness and ignorance,
- (c) deliverance from oppression and exploitation,
- (d) acceptance before God.

Details of the Kingdom are worked out in Mt. 5-7 and Luke 6. 20 ff. You find again in Luke 6. 24 ff. the clarion call against injustice. The basic emphasis in both versions of the Sermon is on a life of righteousness -- not forensic righteousness but real righteousness, 9Lk. 6. 43-49, Mt. 7. 15-27, a life founded on action, not just intellectual belief or heavenly accounting.

Even more impressive are the eschatological parables. Take three of them at random from Mt. 24-25:

1. Mt. 24. 45-51 -The good servant and the wicked servant;
2. Mt. 25. 14-30 - The talents;
3. Mt. 25. 31-46 - The parable of the last judgment.

It has been somewhat disconcerting to my school theology to discover that the central criterion in none of these parables is whether I accept the Lordship of Christ in a social sense or whether I accept Jesus Christ as my personal saviour. The Master is simply taken for granted. The way the servants behave is the criterion of judgment.

In the first parable, the good servant and the bad servant have both been entrusted with God's household (*oiketia autou*), to give them their sustenance in due season, to look after them and their feeding. Both are given authority and responsibility. The one uses his authority to fulfill his responsibility, the other uses it to exploit, oppress, and to live in luxury. The judgment here is definitely in terms of how the household was managed in favour of those who needed to be fed. Economics is the principle of judgment. Oikonomia is home management. The sins which bring judgment are mismanagement and oppression and exploitation. This can be applied to developed nations as well as to developing ones.

In the second, laziness, basic unwillingness to put to work what has been entrusted to the man with the one talent, is the sin that brings judgment. Developing nations are particularly answerable at this point.

In the third, it is the failure to care for the poor, the hungry, the naked, the sick, the enslaved, that brings the judgment of "everlasting punishment". And this judgment applies not just to Christians, but to all nations (Mt. 24. 45).

Writings of Apostles

The question that arises in the minds of many of us is: Do Paul and John see righteousness in this way? For them righteousness comes by faith and not by works. And they would not argue that righteousness is primarily socio-economic. They would regard it as the forgiveness of sins, of God's accepting us as righteous even when we are sinners.

It would appear that the question was posed very early, and is reflected already in the very first piece of New Testament writing we have, namely the Epistle of James. James the righteous, man of the desert, with knees calloused like a camel's from frequent kneeling in prayer, eyes glowing with the fire of a disciplined life of personal holiness and continuous prayer, yet passionately concerned for social justice, could not understand the Hellenistic party in the early Church, of which Paul later became the leader, but which was probably led by Stephen the Proto-martyr.

"What is the use, brothers, of somebody who doesn't do anything saying he has faith? Can that faith save him? If a brother or a sister is in tatters and unable to get anything to eat every day, and one of you say to him 'Good-bye, I wish you to be clothed and fed', without giving him anything to wear or eat, what's the use? So faith, if it does not ensue in works, is just dead useless." (James 2. 14-17).

St. James insists that the relation between faith and works is like body and spirit (2. 26).

Then what exactly did St. Paul and St. John teach? Let me first make two preliminary points about St. Paul.

(a) St. Paul had a radical conversion. He was a Jew from Tarsus, a strict Pharisee, for whom righteousness meant exactly the 613 works of the law. He was reacting against his Phariseism in all his polemic against "works" or "works of the law"; whereas St. James was no Pharisee. If anything, he was an Essene, and for him Christianity was something continuous with his Jewish faith derived from the desert communities. Christianity was only a fulfillment, not a reversal of his previous faith. He had made no right-about-face like St. Paul.

(b) Even St. Paul, when he speaks about Salvation by faith and not by works (Ephesians 2. 8 and 9), in the same breath also says, "We are created anew in Christ Jesus for good works". There is no basic controversy between St. Paul and St. James. There may have been between James' and Stephen's parties.

But let us look now at the Johannine and Pauline notions of righteousness. Let us take St. John first. He is the mystic -- apparently not concerned with social justice, many of us are likely to think. We shall here take the Fourth Gospel and the first Johannine epistles as coming essentially from the Apostle John, though critics may disagree with me here. The first epistle is plain:

"Don't let anybody mislead you, my children; He who practices righteousness is righteous, as Christ is righteous... By this test can be made evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the Devil. He who does not practice righteousness is not born of God; nor he who fails to love his brother... If anyone is rich in worldly goods and sees his brother in want, and yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love dwell in him? Children, don't let us love by nice words and kind speech, but let us show love in action and reality. For only then can we be sure that we are children of the truth, and we can have real reassurance in our own conscience." (I John 3.7,10,17-19.)

The Fourth Gospel also clearly emphasizes the works of Jesus as revealing the work of God; He relates judgment (krisis) directly to works.

"This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, but men loved darkness more than light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices integrity comes to the light, that it may be evident that his deeds are done in God." (John 3. 19-20.)

"My father continues working till now, and I must be working" (Jn. 5. 17). Jesus said in answer to certain Sabbatarian demands not to work. "We must work the works of him while it is day; night comes when no man can work" (Jn. 9.4). He said this as a prelude to opening the eyes of the blind.

John does say that the work of God is believing in Him whom God has sent (6.27 ff.), but he emphasizes his own works as the occasion for faith, and promises his disciples that they will do greater works than these (Jn. 5. 20 ff.). A man's works show whose son he is, God's or the devil's (Jn. 8. 41, 9. 3 if.). It is God who dwells in Christ who does the works (14. 10). And he can say at the end, in his High Priestly prayer "The work thou hast given me, I have finished" (Jn. 17. 4). There is no doubt that John lays heavy stress on doing righteousness, and not simply on an attributed righteousness.

I must now deal quickly with the Pauline notion of righteousness and justification by faith. This can be done only in outline and that too in brief.

- (a) God's righteousness -- God's wrath antinomy in Romans 1. 17 ff.; both are processes; parallel to Qumran doctrine of Angel of Light and Angel of Darkness.
- (b) In the chapter on freedom from sin, i.e. Romans 5, the emphasis is on action: Yield your members as instruments of righteousness.

Freedom from sin means freedom to practice righteousness. Rom. 6. 16. The new life which the spirit brings is a life of righteousness. Rom. 8.10. Faith leads to righteousness. That is what is important for St. Paul. A new structure of law, however, cannot by itself ensure economic justice.

Social justice in our poor countries has been legislated, but cannot be enforced, because it is not grounded in faith yet. In western countries, national economic justice is gradually becoming accepted. A widening of the horizons of the imagination is what is necessary, so that we see the problem of justice in a universal context. "Born of God, you are in Christ Jesus, who has become your wisdom from God, righteousness and holiness, and liberation." (I Cor. 1. 30).

In summary, we have two false positions to guard against:

- (a) the position that regards the question of justice within and among the nations as having nothing to do with the righteousness which God gives us in Christ.
- (b) the position that social justice, both national and international, is the whole of the Biblical notion of righteousness.

One or other of these two false positions is still being adopted by the vast majority of Christians.

Meaning of development

The question now remains, what more than economic justice is actually included? When we ask for development, are we saying more than economic development? Or to put it differently, is economic development the central goal, to which developments in other areas such as health, education, science, technology and culture should be geared?

Here we have a double problem. In developing countries, everything depends on economic development, so that there is a temptation to gear other matters to this idea of economic development. Economic power is dynamics. Without it other developments are seriously impeded. Whereas in the developed countries economic development has already reached a point where attention can be diverted to other areas of development, the problem posed in these countries is of a different order of priorities.

The socialist countries of the world have begun to face this problem on the lines of Marxist thought -- that the economic structure is the basic substructure that has to be built up as foundation for human development. If at one time, personal or individual freedom and freedom of the press were subordinated to the needs of the economy which alone could assure the freedom of the nations within which personal freedom could flourish, now that the economic structure has begun to be built, it is true, many Marxists are now saying, to give attention to some of the other questions about personal freedom and dignity. Among power, love and wisdom, power has often received primary consideration, and wisdom has been subordinated to the needs of power and not of the power-love combination. But power itself is indispensable to the dignity of man. Those who have economic power may find it difficult to understand the decision of some of the have-not nations to give economic power a higher priority than personal freedom and dignity.

The way forward

The following points need to have immediate attention in the Churches' own educational programme:

- The broadening of human consciousness to include all mankind. To think of this as our oikonomia (management) of the oikoumene (inhabited earth) for its oikodome (development). All nations have to be prepared to do this, do it together, knowing that "no nation is an island", even those that are so geographically.
- The acceptance of the principle of dynamic pluralism. The basic issue of the apparent conflict between cultural identity, which is by nature local, and the nature of science and technology as essentially universal. We have to teach our people to understand and tolerate others who think differently, worship differently, and govern differently.
- This would mean -- the co-ordination of all the power, love and wisdom of all nations for the welfare of the whole of mankind:
 - Structure. - UN should receive more power. We are still, in the international field, at the stage where the capitalist statement: "The best government is the least government" is the prevailing idea. Legislature, judiciary and executive have all three to be developed for world-wide political and economic structures,
 - The conscious attempt to shift the base of peace from wasteful over-armament to a democratically controlled central machinery of peace-keeping. Actual disarmament, and not simply non-proliferation, can begin to release economic resources for development,

- The special role of the two big powers who now arrogate to themselves the control of the world. The hybris of power is a real temptation to the big two, as well as to the up and coming big power constellations like Europe.
- An inclusive human society where none is excluded, on the grounds of religion, race, culture, political behaviour, etc. All nations from Switzerland to China and even the Vatican have to become part of this world structure.
- The urgent task of a middle technology geared to the needs of the developing nations with surplus of manpower, and the assurance of a market for their products. Western technology is unsuitable for developing nations. Western research must aid in the development of a technology suited to manpower surplus economies.
- Greater assistance to the cultures of the economically non-dominant nations to develop a new synthesis of their own, in the light of modern knowledge - and a common search for a new doctrine of man which can be used as a criterion for evaluating western culture.
- A fresh understanding of the revolutionary stand of the have-not nations on the part of the have-nations. Law and order are subsidiary to justice.
- In this cultural pluralism, the role of religion should be fully restored. Transcendence can be maintained only at the cost of a measure of apparent irrelevance. Christianity must step off its exclusivistic arrogant stand and take the initiative in understanding the other religions, especially Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, all of which have great vitality but stand in need of renewal.

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