

conduct required of the oppressors, the demands made on all to live a life worthy of the Kingdom.³²

Gratuitousness and action are not opposed, then. The coming of the Kingdom of God is something that, on the one hand, can only be asked for, not forced; but on the other, the will of God has to be put into effect now on this earth. What is clear is the absolute loving initiative of God, which is neither forced nor can be forced—this being both unnecessary and impossible—by human actions. Clear too is that this gratuitous love of God's is what generates the need and the possibility of a loving human response. When a sinner is converted, it is God's goodness and mercy that moves the sinner to change. "The mercy of God we experience . . . is the precondition, the basis and the foundation of the merciful behavior that ought to obtain among us."³³ In the words of 1 John, "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (4:11). The gratuitous love of God both shows us what loving one another means and enables us to put it into practice.

God's gift is not opposed to human activity, or, more precisely, is opposed to only one thing: this activity being understood in a Promethean sense, being capable of causing or forcing God's action. What Jesus is rejecting, then, in affirming the Kingdom as gift, is that—as the Essenes, Pharisees and various armed movements claimed, in their various ways—we either can or should force the coming of the Kingdom. It comes purely from God's love. On this level, indeed, the only thing we can do is simply pray, as Jesus taught: "Your Kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2)

(iii) *The Kingdom of God as eu-aggelion, good news.* The coming of the Kingdom of God—in the understanding of the traditions preceding Jesus—means crisis for and judgment on the world and history. Jesus was no tranquilizer of consciences distancing himself from the Baptist. He shared his idea of judgment and, probably, expected the coming of the Son of Man at that time (see the apocalyptic discourse of Mark 13 par.). Nevertheless, this is not the most specific and original aspect of the proclamation of the Kingdom. Unlike the Baptist, what is imminent is not God's judgment—though this will come—but God's grace. And this is what Jesus expresses in a term not found in John the Baptist: *eu-aggelion*, the good news.

Jesus states that the coming of God's Kingdom is good and the ultimate good. Jesus, like the Baptist, requires conversion when he announces the coming of the Kingdom (Mark 1:14; Matt. 4:17), and later demands radical conversion. But, in itself, the coming of the Kingdom is, above all else, good news, as Matthew and Luke spell out: "The good news of the Kingdom of God." This is the vital core of Jesus' message: God is coming close; God is coming close because God is good, and it is good for us that God should come close. In Rahner's systematic language, God has broken for once and for all the symmetry of being possibly savior or possibly condemning judge. God is seen, in essence, as salvation, and God's approach is directly salvation.

Let us look briefly at the term *eu-aggelion* and how it relates to the Kingdom of

God. It appears frequently in the New Testament, and with a variety of meanings.³⁴ In the Synoptics, it is a central term and again has a variety of meanings. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, when the evangelist himself is speaking, the term "good news" can refer either to Jesus himself or to what Jesus brings (1:1). But in other passages, where *eu-aggelion* is put into Jesus' mouth, it is used in a strict sense (8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9) and it appears once as "the good news from God" (1:14). For Mark, then, the good news is what Jesus brings from God, though Jesus' person, life and destiny also form part of the good news.

In Matthew, *eu-aggelion* means "the good news of the Kingdom" (4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Luke avoids the use of *eu-aggelion* as a noun throughout his Gospel and it appears only twice in Acts: once on its own (15:7) and once qualified as "the good news of God's grace" (20:24). On the other hand he—and Q—make liberal use of the verb "evangelize" (ten times in the Gospel and fifteen in Acts), in the sense of "bring the good news to." In Luke and in Q, therefore, the word *eu-aggelion* is referred back to its meaning in Isaiah (61:1-3; 42:1-4; 51:16; 52:7; 59:21), "in whom the concepts of 'eschatological prophet' and 'bringing the good news to the poor' are tied one to another."³⁵

The conclusion has to be that in the Gospels, Jesus is good news, but, with logical priority, the good news is what Jesus brings: the Kingdom of God. This is naturally so, since there is no way of separating the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaims and the good news Jesus himself brings. But sometimes they are one, even linguistically: the "good news of the Kingdom of God" means the Kingdom of God as good news.

This being so, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is not only something true—this is how things are—but something that in essence has to be proclaimed with joy and must produce joy, as the Gospels also attest. And this, let me say in passing, imposes certain conditions on how it is proclaimed today and enables us to verify whether it has in fact been proclaimed. To proclaim something to be believed which, also, turns out to be good news, is not the same as directly to proclaim good news which is, also, true. And one way of verifying whether what has been proclaimed is good news is to check that it produces joy, since it would be a strict contradiction to proclaim it without producing joy. The joy of those who proclaim it and those who receive it is an essential condition of the proclamation at issue being good news, something frequently forgotten in the mission of the church, which is often more concerned with communicating a "truth" that has to be given and received in an orthodox manner, without bothering to present it with joy and to check whether or not it has produced joy.

In short, for the Kingdom of God to be *eu-aggelion* means that it must make its hearers rejoice. As Leonardo Boff has written, "Jesus articulates a radical aspect of human nature, its hope-principle and its utopic dimension. And he promises that it will now not be *utopia*, the object of anxious awaiting (cf Luke 3:14), but *topia*, an object of joy for all the people (cf Luke 2:9)."³⁶ Or, in the words of Raúl Aguirre, "Jesus gave religious expression to the actual situation of the immense majority of the Jewish people in the first century. The God of the Kingdom expresses the real

hope of a people in great material difficulties, subjected to a cultural and political crisis of identity. This is why Jesus aroused undoubted popular support throughout the whole of his ministry."³⁷

3. The Way of the Addressee: the Kingdom of God is for the Poor

I have already mentioned the subject of the "addressee" as one way of finding out what this Kingdom might consist of. The following logical consideration is relevant here: if the Kingdom of God is "good news," its recipients will help fundamentally in clarifying its content, since good news is something essentially relational, not all good news being so in equal measure for everyone.

In order to grasp what it means for the Kingdom of God to have specific addressees and so to be essentially partial, we need to remember that Jesus offered God's love to all, but not in the same way.³⁸ Certainly, Jesus did not come in the sectarian guise of his time, offering salvation only to those belonging to a particular group (Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots and the like), nor did he adopt a primarily antagonistic stance. He came rather as a positive evangelizer, concerned for the salvation of all and willing the Kingdom of God to be brought within the reach of all. As Schillebeeckx says, "Jesus' praxis and activity never had an anti, but a pro character."³⁹

This, however, does not prevent Jesus from having a specific addressee in mind when proclaiming the Kingdom of God. All that can be deduced from it is that he did not exclude anyone from the possibility of entering into the Kingdom. But not excluding does not mean the same as addressing himself directly to certain people. And these are the poor.

(a) *The Poor as Addressees of the Kingdom of God*

In order to analyze who the addressees of the Kingdom of God are, let us start with this impressive quotation from Joachim Jeremias: "By ascertaining that Jesus proclaimed the dawn of the consummation of the world, we have not yet completely described his preaching of the *basileia*. On the contrary, we have not yet mentioned its essential feature... the offer of salvation Jesus makes to the poor.... The Kingdom belongs *uniquely to the poor*."⁴⁰ Jesus indeed understood his mission as directed to the poor: "... he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). This is shown too by his jubilant response to those sent by John: "the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22; Matt. 11:5). The first of his beatitudes, in Luke's version, proclaims: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20). These statements are basic for understanding what the Kingdom of God is for Jesus. They stand not in the line of discontinuity—as his audacity in stating that the Kingdom is at hand might—but in that of continuity, being rooted in the Old Testament. Yet, as Jeremias understands, they are the basic element for introducing us to the content of the Kingdom of God.

This relationship between the Kingdom of God and the poor is established in the Gospels as a fact, but more basically it appears as a relationship as of right, based

on the very reality of God as this was shown in the Old Testament. This is what Jeremias means by that "*uniquely*." And this is impressively borne out by Puebla: by the mere fact of being poor, whatever the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves, God defends them and loves them, and they are the first ones to whom Jesus' mission is directed (cf. 1142).

This statement is still fundamental and is still, in my view, the touchstone for understanding the Kingdom of God, Jesus and the church's mission today. It is often diluted by taking as poor—and spiritualizing them—the poor mentioned in Matthew 5:3, or nullified by equating poverty with metaphysical limitation, so that all human beings can be included in the category of poor. It is also confusing to recall that poverty has various meanings in the Gospels (as Puebla itself does, 1148ff). The question here is not to deny that the "poor in spirit" or metaphysical "limitation" or different meanings of poverty exist—or that they can exist, and a good thing too—but to know which poor Jesus was thinking of when he said that the Kingdom of God belongs to them. This is the basic question now.

Descriptively—and following Jeremias once more⁴¹—the poor are divided into two classes in the Synoptics. On the one side are those who groan under some type of basic need in the tradition of Isaiah 61:1ff. So the poor are those who hunger and thirst, who go naked, strangers, the sick, those in prison, those who mourn, those weighed down by a real burden (Luke 6:20-21; Matt. 25:25ff). In this sense, the poor are those who live bent (*anawin*) under the weight of a burden—which Jesus often interpreted as oppression—those for whom life and survival is a hard task. In modern parlance, we could call these the *economic* poor, in the sense that the *oikos* (the hearth, the home, the symbol of what is basic and primary in life) is in grave danger, and that they are thereby denied the minimum of life.

On the other side, the poor are those despised by the ruling society, those considered sinners, the publicans, the prostitutes (Mark 2:16; Matt. 11:19; 21:23; Luke 15:1ff), the simple-minded, the little ones, the least (Matt. 11:25; Mark 9:36ff; Matt. 10:42; 18:10-14; 25:40-45), those who carry out despised tasks (Matt. 12:31; Luke 18:11). In this sense, the poor are the marginalized, those "whose religious ignorance and moral behavior closed, in the conviction of the time, the gate leading to salvation for them."⁴² These could be called the *sociological* poor, in the sense that being a *socium* (the symbol of basic interhuman relationships) is denied them, and with this, the minimum of dignity.

So the Gospels do not provide an absolutely clear-cut image of the poor Jesus was thinking of as addressees of the Kingdom, nor of course a strictly conceptual reflection designed to answer the questions we ask now about the meaning of poverty.⁴³ But neither can they be said to lack a basic vision of what the poor meant to Jesus. The poor are those who are at the bottom of the heap in history and those who are oppressed by society and cast out from it; they are not, therefore, all human beings, but those at the bottom, and being at the bottom in this sense means being oppressed by those on top. Both economic poverty and lack of moral dignity can

can express this being at the bottom. From a purely conceptual point of view, the two can be separated (Zachaeus suffered the social shunning, but not the economic poverty), but both senses of being poor usually go together and converge in history, as happens today in the Third World. The poor are those close to the slow death poverty brings, those for whom surviving is a heavy burden and their chief task, and those who are also deprived of social dignity and sometimes also of religious dignity for not complying with church legislation. The poor are those who in Latin America are usually called the "popular majorities."

To these poor, Jesus showed undoubted partiality, so that what is now called the option for the poor can be said to start with him (though it goes back before him to the prophets, and indeed to God himself): partially toward the economic poor, as shown in the beatitudes in Luke, and partially toward the sociological poor, as shown in his standing up for publicans and sinners expressed with even more force, perhaps, than the former, precisely because their alienation on religious grounds was more provocative to him.⁴⁴

Having said this, let me briefly characterize the poor as a social grouping at the time of Jesus, in order to shed light on the present discussion on what they mean, now that we are all asked to make a preferential option for the poor, and to show, above all, what the Kingdom of God meant for Jesus.

In the first place, one must stress that the Synoptics speak of *the poor in the plural*, not of poor individuals or the sum total of poor individuals, but of a reality—be it understood as a group or a class—that is collective and massive and sufficiently defined in historical terms. "The poor," in the plural, are spoken of in the beatitudes; "crowds" of the sick in the summaries; and the "multitudes" who listened to Jesus are often mentioned.

Looking at these groups or collectivity of poor in more detail,⁴⁵ the first thing to note is that they are *economically-sociologically* poor. The New Testament Greek word most frequently used to describe them is *ptochos* (from the verb *ptosso*, to crouch or bend down). It appears twenty-five times, and in twenty-two cases, "refers to the economically afflicted and dispossessed."⁴⁶ In the other three cases, where it means spiritually poor (Matt. 3:5; cf. Gal. 4:9; Rev. 3:17), there is always some qualification added. And in the three places where Jesus relates the Kingdom of God to the *ptochoi* (Matt. 11:5 = Luke 7:22; Luke 4:18 and 6:20), the meaning is not spiritual. The conclusion is that for the New Testament and for Jesus "the term 'poor' is a sociological category, even in the three texts that mention good news to the poor."⁴⁷

The second thing to note is that these are *dialectically* poor. In the Gospels, poor and rich are spoken of as different and contrasted groups. The New Testament does not in fact express this with the clarity and force of the Old. The contrast is rather between poor and envious. But even if it is not as explicit, this does not mean that the Old Testament context is not pervasive: "behind this understanding of rich and poor the class dialectic of the Old Testament is implicit."⁴⁸ The reversal of fate

awaiting the poor and the rich in the Gospels—see the *Magnificat*—“has no meaning except that the understanding of poverty as a state of unjust oppression remains in force in the New Testament.”⁴⁹

It is, then to *these* poor that Jesus says the Kingdom of God belongs: those for whom the basic things of life are so hard to achieve, those who live despised and outcast, who live under oppression, who, in short, have nothing to look forward to; those who, furthermore, feel themselves cut off from God, since religious society forces them to introject this understanding—it is these whom Jesus tells to have hope, that God is not like their oppressors have made them think, that the end of their misfortunes is at hand, that the Kingdom of God is coming and is for them.

These poor are the majority, which is quantitatively important in itself, but important also for understanding the universality of the Kingdom of God, something to which liberation theology seems to have called attention. It is at least careless, if not hypocritical, to stress its universality—as a means of rejecting its partiality—since there is little universal about a universality that fails to take the majorities of this world into account. And the quality of these majorities also indicates that the Kingdom can come to be a universal reality: if life comes even to these—to whom it never has come—then one can indeed speak of the universality of the Kingdom of God.

If the poor, understood in this way, are those to whom the Kingdom is addressed, then it is from them that we can better understand what sort of Kingdom Jesus was thinking of. It is a strictly partial Kingdom and one whose minimum, but basic, content is the life and dignity of the poor.

(b) *The Partiality of the Kingdom of God*

As an eschatological reality, the Kingdom of God is universal, and open to all, though not to all in the same way. But the Kingdom is addressed directly only to the poor. And this being so, it is essentially “partial.” This statement, so clear in the Bible, yet so difficult of acceptance—look at the interminable debates over the present “option for the poor,” which had to be qualified into “preferential” so as to make the option less radical—has its roots in the Old Testament, which treats this partiality as something essential. While we so often use arguments from the Old Testament in order to understand Jesus, we now need to look briefly at the partiality that runs through it, in order to understand Jesus and the Kingdom he proclaimed.⁵⁰

The founding event of the Old Testament, the exodus, shows God being partial to an oppressed people, revealing himself to them, not to all, liberating them, not everyone. And this partiality is a basic mediation of God’s self-revelation. It is not that God reveals himself first as he is and then shows himself partial to the oppressed. It is rather *in and through* his partiality toward the oppressed that God reveals his own identity. And this pattern persists through the whole of the Old Testament. “Father of orphans and protector of widows...,” God is defined as in Psalm 68:5. In the prophets God calls not the whole of Israel, but the oppressed