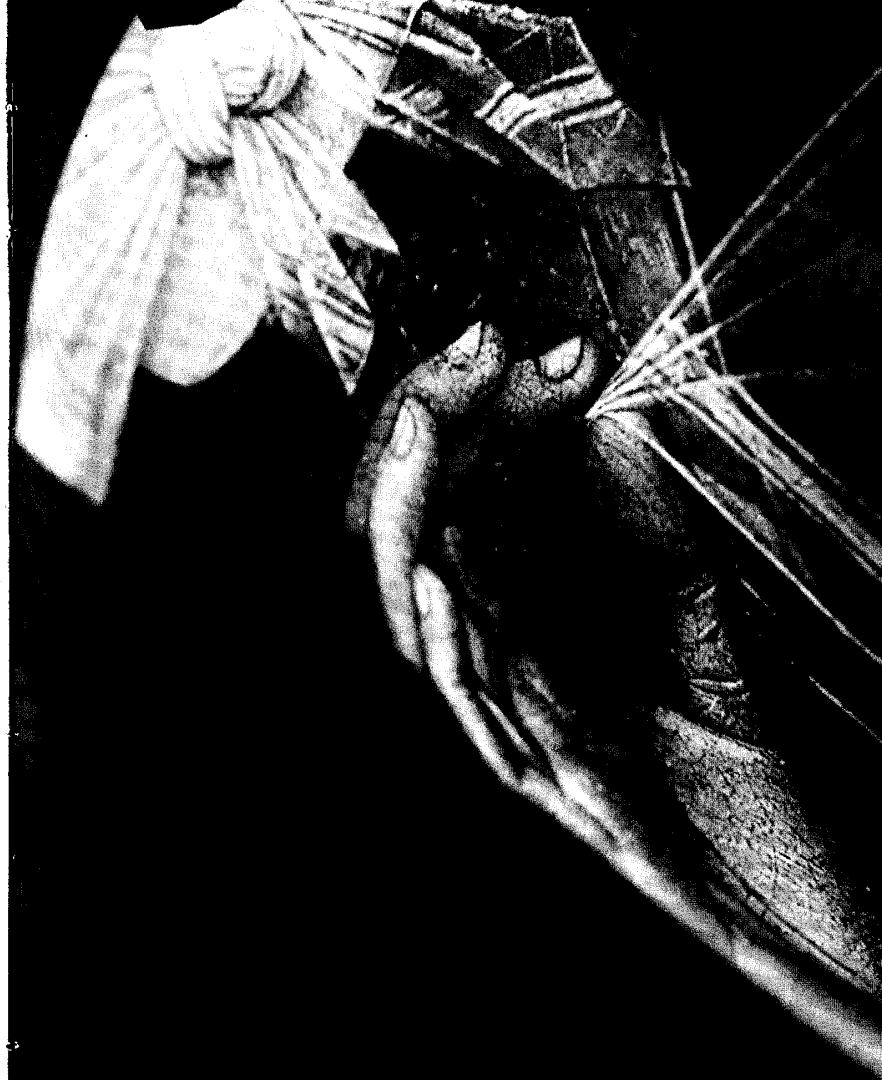




One of the very earliest texts in the ecclesiastical tradition, Clement's Letter to the Corinthians, begins: 'The Church of our Lord sojourning in Rome to the Church of our Lord sojourning in Corinth.' In Greek, *paroikousa*, which I'm translating as 'sojourning', is a term with a very precise meaning. It designates the manner in which foreigners and those in exile dwell. It is opposed to the Greek verb *katoikein*, which designates how a citizen of a city, state, kingdom or empire dwells. This is the formula I've chosen to begin my address to the Church of our Lord, in sojourn or exile, here in Paris.

Why this formula? The answer is because I have come to speak of the messiah. *Paroikein*, to sojourn as a foreigner, is the word that designates how a Christian is to live in the world and, by that token, that person's experience of time – and, more precisely, of messianic time. That in the ecclesiastical tradition this is a technical term, or something approaching one, is clear from the fact, to choose a single instance, that Peter's First Letter (1 Peter 1.17) defines the experience of time proper to the Church as *ho chronos tē paroikias*, and which can be translated as 'parochial time' on the condition that we recall that parish originally meant 'the sojourn of a foreigner'.

It is important to bear in mind that the term 'sojourn' does not refer here to a fixed period of time: that it does not designate chronological duration. The sojourning of the Church on earth can last – and indeed has lasted – not only centuries but millennia without altering its messianic experience



of time. This point requires special emphasis as it is opposed to what is often called a ‘delay of the *parousia*’. According to this position— which has always seemed blasphemous to me—the initial Christian community, expecting as it did the imminent arrival of the messiah and thus the end of time, found itself confronted with an inexplicable delay. In response to this delay there was a reorientation to stabilize the institutional and juridical organization of the early Church. The consequence of this position is that the Christian community has ceased to *paroikein*, to sojourn as a foreigner, so as to begin to *katoikein*, to live as a citizen and thus function like any other worldly institution.

If this is the case, the Church has lost the messianic experience of time that defines it and is one with it. The time of the messiah cannot designate a chronological period or duration but, instead, must represent nothing less than a qualitative change in

how time is experienced. For this reason it is inconceivable to speak of a chronological delay in this context as though one were speaking of a train being delayed. Because there is no place in messianic time for a fixed and final habitation, there is no time for delay. It is with this in mind that Paul reminds the Thessalonians, ‘About dates and times, my friends, we need not write to you, for you know perfectly well that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night’ (1 Thess 5.1–2; 262).¹ In this passage ‘comes [*erchetai*’] is in the present tense, just as in the Gospels the messiah is called *ho erchomenos*, ‘he who comes’—that is, he who never ceases to come. Having perfectly understood Paul’s meaning, Walter Benjamin once wrote that, ‘every day, every instant, is the small gate through which the messiah enters.’

I would like thus to speak to you about the structure of this time—that is, of the time that Paul describes in his letters. In this regard, care must be

taken to avoid confusion between *messianic* time and *apocalyptic* time. The apocalyptic thinker is found on the last day, Judgement Day. He or she sees the end of time and describes what is seen. If I were to resume in a single phrase the difference between messianic time and apocalyptic time, I would say that the messianic is not the end of time but the time of the end. What is messianic is not the end of time but the relation of every moment, every *kaivos*, to the end of time and to eternity. Consequently, what interests Paul is not the final day, the moment at which time ends, but the time that contracts and begins to end. Or, one might say, the time that remains between time and its end.

In the Judaic tradition there is a distinction between two times and two worlds: the *olam hazzeḥ*, the time stretching from the creation of the world to its end, and the *olam habba*, the time that begins after the end of time. Both terms are present, in

their Greek translations, in Paul's Letters. Messianic time, however—the time in which the apostle lives and the only one that interests him—is neither that of the *olam hazzeḥ* nor that of the *olam habba*. It is, instead, the time between those two times, when time is divided by the messianic event (which is for Paul the Resurrection).

How can we best conceive of this time? If we represent this time geometrically as a segment taken from a line, the definition I've just given—the time that remains between the Resurrection and the end of time—does not seem to present any difficulties. Everything changes, however, if we try to conceive this time more fully. It is perfectly clear that to live in 'the time that remains', to experience 'the time of the end', can only mean a radical transformation of our experience of time. What is at issue is neither the homogenous and infinite line of chronological time (easy to visually represent but empty of all



experience) nor the precise and unimaginable instant where it ends. Nor, for that matter, can we conceive of it as that segment of chronological time extending from the Resurrection to the end of time. Instead, what is at issue is a time that pulses and moves within chronological time, that transforms chronological time from within. On the one hand it is the time that time takes to end. But on the other hand it is the time that remains, the time which we need to end time, to confront our customary image of time and to liberate ourselves from it. In the one case, the time in which we believe we live separates us from what we are and transforms us into powerless spectators of our own lives. In the other case, however, the time of the messiah is the time that we ourselves are, the dynamic time where, for the first time, we grasp time, grasp the time that is ours, grasp that we are nothing but that time. This time is not some other time located in an improbably present or future time. On the contrary, it is the only real time, the

only time we will ever have. To experience this time implies an integral transformation of ourselves and of our ways of living.

This is what Paul affirms in an extraordinary passage, and which perhaps presents the most beautiful definition of messianic time: 'But this I say, my brothers, time has contracted [*ho kairos synestalmenos esti*—the Greek verb *synstelllein* indicates both the clewing up of a ship's sails and an animal's gathering of its strength before pouncing];² while it lasts, those with wives should be as those who are without, those who weep as though they wept not, those who rejoice as though they rejoiced not, those who buy as though they possessed not, and they that use this world, as not abusing it' (I Cor. 7.29–31; 215).

A few lines earlier Paul had written of the messianic vocation (*klēsis*): 'Let every man remain in the calling in which he was called. Were you called as a slave? Do not be troubled. But if you can become free, make use of it' (I Cor. 7.20–22). The *hōs mē*, the



‘as not’, means that the ultimate meaning of the messianic vocation is the revocation of every vocation. Just as messianic time transforms chronological time from within, rather than abolishing it, the messianic vocation, thanks to the *hōs mē*, the ‘as not’, revokes every vocation, at once voids and transforms every vocation and every condition so as to free them for a new usage (‘make use of it’).

The question’s importance stems from the fact that it allows for a proper consideration of the relation between the ultimate and the penultimate, between the last things and the next to last ones which define the messianic condition. Can a Christian live only with the ultimate, only with the last things? Dietrich Bonhoeffer denounced the false opposition of radicalism to compromise for the reason that both options consist in drastically separating ultimate realities from the penultimate ones which make up our everyday human and social condition.

Just as messianic time is not some other time but, instead, an integral transformation of chronological time, an ultimate experience (an experience of the last things) would entail, first and foremost, experiencing penultimate things differently. In this context eschatology is nothing other than a transformation of the experience of the penultimate. Given that ultimate realities take place first in penultimate ones, the latter—contrary to any radicalism—cannot be freely negated. And yet—and for the same reason—the penultimate things cannot in any case be invoked against the ultimate ones. For this reason Paul expresses the messianic relation between final and penultimate things with the verb *katargein*, which does not mean ‘destroy’ but, instead, ‘render inoperative’. The ultimate reality deactivates, suspends and transforms, the penultimate ones—and yet, it is precisely, and above all, in these penultimate realities that an ultimate reality bears witness and is put to the test.



The preceding allows us to understand Paul's idea of the Kingdom. Contrary to the contemporary eschatological interpretation, it should not be forgotten that the time of the messiah cannot be, for Paul, a future time. The expression he uses to refer to this time is always *ho nyn kairos*, 'now time'. As he writes in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, '*Idou nyn*, behold, now is the time to gather, behold the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6.2; 231). *Paroika* and *parousia*, the sojourn of the foreigner and the presence of the messiah, have the same structure, expressed in Greek through the preposition *pará*: a presence that distends time, an *already* that is also a *not yet*, a delay that does not put off until later but, instead, a disconnection within the present moment that allows us to grasp time.

Living in this time, experiencing this time, is thus not something that the Church can choose, or choose not, to do. It is only in this time that there is a Church at all.

Where do we find such an experience of time in today's Church? That is the question that I have come, here and now, to pose to the Church of Christ sojourning in Paris. An evocation of final things, of ultimate things, has so completely disappeared from the statements of the Church that it has been said, not without irony, that the Roman Church has closed its eschatological window. And it is with more bitter irony still that a French theologian has remarked that, 'Christ announced the coming of the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church.' This is a disquieting declaration, but one which merits reflection.

Given what I have said about the structure of messianic time it is clear that what is at issue cannot be to chastise the Church in the name of radicalism for its worldly compromises, just as little as it can be to portray the Roman Church—as did the greatest orthodox theologian of the nineteenth century, Fyodor Dostoevski—as a Grand Inquisitor. What is



at issue, instead, is the Church's ability to read what Matthew called 'the signs of the times', *ta semeia tōn kairōn* (Mt 16.3; 23). What are these signs which the apostle opposed to the futile desire to know the forms that move across the sky? If the relation of history to the Kingdom is penultimate, the Kingdom nevertheless is to be found first and foremost in that history. For this reason, to live in the time of the messiah means to read the signs of his presence in history, to recognize in the course of history 'the signature of the economy of salvation [*la segnatura dell'economia della salvezza*]'.³ In the eyes of the Church Fathers— as well as the eyes of those philosophers who have reflected on the philosophy of history, which is, and remains (even in Marx) an essentially Christian discipline—history is presented as a field traversed by two opposing forces. The first of these forces—which Paul, in a passage of the Second Letter to the Thessalonians that is as famous as it is enigmatic, calls *to catechon*—maintains and ceaselessly

defers the end along the linear and homogenous line of chronological time. By placing origin and end in contact with one another, this force endlessly fulfils and ends time. Let us call this force Law or State, dedicated as it is to economy, which is to say, dedicated as it is to the indefinite—and indeed infinite—governance of the world. As for the second force, let us call it messiah, or Church; its economy is the economy of salvation, and by this token is essentially completed. The only way that a community can form and last is if these poles are present and a dialectical tension between them prevails.

It is precisely this tension which seems today to have disappeared. As a sense for an economy of salvation in historical time is weakened, or eliminated, the economy extends its blind and derisive dominion to every aspect of social life. Today, we witness the eschatological exigency which the Church has abandoned return in secularized, and parodic form, in the occult sciences that have rediscovered





the obsolete gestures of the prophet and announce every sort of irreversible catastrophe. The crises—the states of permanent exception and emergency—that the governments of the world continually proclaim are in reality a secularized parody of the Church's incessant deferral of the Last Judgment. With the eclipse of the messianic experience of the culmination of the law and of time comes an unprecedented hypertrophy of law—one that, under the guise of legislating everything, betrays its legitimacy through legalistic excess. I say the following with words carefully weighed: nowhere on earth today is a legitimate power to be found; even the powerful are convinced of their own illegitimacy. The complete juridification and commodification of human relations—the confusions between what we might believe, hope and love and that which we are obliged to do or not do, say or not say—are signs not only of crises of law and state but also, and

above all, of crises of the Church. The reason for this is that the Church can be a living institution only on the condition that it maintains an immediate relation to its end. And—a point which we would do well not to forget—according to Christian theology there is only one legal institution which knows neither interruption nor end: hell. The model of contemporary politics—which pretends to an infinite economy of the world—is thus truly infernal. And if the Church curtails its original relation with the *paroikia*, it cannot but lose itself in time.

For this reason, the question I came here today to ask you, without any other authority than an obstinate habit of reading the signs of the time, is this: Will the Church finally grasp the historical occasion and recover its messianic vocation? If it does not, the risk is clear enough: it will be swept away by the disaster menacing every government and every institution on earth.

Notes

The preceding talk—or, perhaps more precisely, homily—was given in the Notre-Dame Cathedral on 8 March 2009, in the presence of the Bishop of Paris as well as a number of other high-ranking Church officials. Its author has lived—or, more precisely, sojourned—in Paris for various periods since the early 1970s.

- 1 All Biblical citations are from *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford and Cambridge: Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1970). At points these have been modified to more closely correspond to Giorgio Agamben's translations from the Greek.
- 2 It is telling in this regard that English translations have employed various expressions in the attempt to render this difficult phrase, all of which seem to reflect an exceptionally brief chronological period. The King James Bible

uses the expression, 'But this I say, brethren, the time *is* short' and which The Revised Version changes to 'the time is shortened' and The New English Bible modifies to 'The time we live in will not last long.' See *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1885) and *The Holy Bible: The Revised Version* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

- 3 The slightly stilted, and slightly obscure, form of this expression is due to the fact that it refers to—or, more precisely, is a luminous abbreviation of—the central ideas expounded in Agamben's two most recent works— *The Signature of All Things* (Luca di Santo and Kevin Atell trans) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009) and *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Lorenzo Chiesa trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

