Volume VIII Number 2

Autumn 1985

KING'S Theological Review

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS JUSTICE AND PEACE

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The message of the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1983 not surprisingly included a strong commitment to justice and peace in the face of injustice, poverty, economic exploitation, racism, war and ecological disaster. It was summed up in the sentence: "The tree of peace has justice for its roots."[1] Such a commitment, in one way, merely continues a major ecumenical tradition going back before the Council to the "Life and Work" Movement, and indeed is rooted in the whole history of the Church. Recent decades, however, have witnessed a new dimension to this theme from the growing influence of the Churches of the Third World, not least the Liberation theologies of Latin America. Emerging clearly at the crucial Geneva 1966 conference, there has been a shift from a theology of cooperation and development to the more radical analyses of the world economic structures and revolutionary theologies of the Southern world. There has been a growing acceptance of Marxist forms of social analysis that argues that poverty is endemic in the present econmic system and can only be changed by radical action that breaks the mould and builds again. There has, also, and not always so closely connected as in Liberation Theology, been a widespread recognition that Christian believing is a radical commitment to "the struggle for justice" expressed in an "option for the poor". Mission, indeed, is as much about seeking a new society as the call to discipleship.[2]

No-one wants to underestimate the importance of such insights, nor deny a welcome to the transformation of the Christian perspective on the world in the face of such massive problems. Yet that key sentence would seem to betray a kind of "orthodoxy", a fundamental assumption that may not be wholly defensible. Priority is clearly given to the need for justice. Peace grows from suitably prepared soil and properly nurtured seeds. Peace is consequent on justice — so the first task is to wage war on all that oppresses man, for only when the victory is won is peace assured. It has, of course, to be recognised that there is a whole spectrum of interpretation and preception encapsulated in what is after all an almost sloganistic phrase. Yet it is surely not foolish to see in it a marker of a set of widely accepted attitudes of which Liberation theologies are leading exponents.

Perhaps the issue can be further clarified by brief references to two recent publications.

In *The Power of the Poor in History* Gustavo Gutierrez gives two index references to peace, of which the more important contains the following:

> "Perhaps what most shocks the Christian seeking to take sides frankly and decisively with the poor and exploited is the conflictual nature of praxis in this context.
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> Politics today involves confrontation... Being an "artisan for peace" not only does not dispense from presence in all these conflicts, it demands that one take part in them... There is no peace without justice... In Christian circles, of course, we are not very much accustomed to thinking in conflictual, concrete terms. Instead of antagonism we prefer an eirenic (sic. peaceful) spirit of reconciliation... We have to learn to live peace, and think peace, in the midst of conflict."[3]

With most of what is hinted at here one can only concur. To take sides with the poor does bring one up sharp against the realities of power, vested interest, inertia, cruelty and indifference. Human sin is entrenched in both the hearts of people and the structures of class, order, law and property. Nor can we escape these harsh realities. Conflict is real and there is no sitting on the fence. Consequences have to be accepted. God is indeed on the side of the poor, the outcast, the disadvantaged. At the same time only too frequently the resolution of conflict has merely been the imposition of a new injustice or at best a poor compromise that in fact resolves nothing. The search for peace can so easily be a "cop out" for the already compromised.

All that, and more, can and must be taken with all seriousness. But in fact Gutierrez is saying more than that in a polarised world we are inevitably caught up in conflict in which we must actively engage; that Christians must be counted by their commitment. By introducing the word "praxis" he is actually saying that the conflictual model is a correct analysis not only of how the world is but of how it has to be changed. In other words, the evangelical call for justice and the commitment to it has to become, by definition, aligned with this kind of conflictual praxis. As a result the emphasis is placed on the "struggle for justice" and only minimally on the grudgingly acknowledged call to be peacemakers, "artisans for peace". Indeed, there is a suspicion that "the spirit of conciliation" is a betrayal of the commitment to justice and that peace making is compromise. Such a feeling is also found in World Council Assembly documentation. The nuclear issue is clearly of permanent importance but some from the Third World are, surely rightly, anxious that preoccupation with "the bomb" may detract from what is seen to be the more fundamental needs of justice in the economic world order. So when Gutierrez says, "We have to learn to live in peace, and think peace, in the midst of conflict" he is probably not saying that we have to hold on to being peaceable when all around in conflict but that we enter into conflict because it is the way to peace.

A similar point is made by Jose Miguez Bonino in *Towards a Christian Political Ethics*. He states, categorically, "the fixed point is justice, the right of the poor. This is the theological premise from which we cannot depart". That does not mean that order is unimportant or that conflict is always wise. "In fact the biblical concept of peace (shalom) includes well-ordered relationships... which make human life possible in society."[4] However, what Miguez Bonino is anxious to establish is the contrast between a theology that starts from injustice and the analysis of its causes and remedies and a theology that starts from the assumption that conflict is destructive and that order takes priority over justice and change. This is a contrast, he argues, between the optimistic prophetic faith of the Bible and the western Augustinianism of the catholic-protestant tradition which holds the world to be always a conflict between order and chaos without hope of much improvement. If, this argument claims, the precarious equilibrium is upset by too much violence or change, that ordering by which God sustains human existence will break down entirely, leaving us in hell. While there is always a commitment to justice,

order is paramount. "Peace, therefore, understood as order, is the basic direction, the ultimate ethical key".[5] This Augustinian stance, is set aside by the Liberation Theologian for the "call to radical transformation inspired by the prophetic-messianic focus on the justice and peace of the Kingdom of God."[6] Once again peace has been subsumed under justice for peace is only the completion of a state of justice.

II

The question is whether the claim of the liberation tradition is biblically justified or not. In a short paper it is not possible to address more than one issue and that in a limited way. Here, however, appears to lie one of the theological foundations of liberation theology. But is it sufficient to understand peace as primarily a consequence of justice? Is peace to be regarded as an eschatological or future state while justice, while also a goal, is to be the means and immediate task? Do we struggle for justice so that peace may come? Do the oft quoted words of Isaiah (32.17) adequately sum up the position?

> "The effect of righteousness will be peace, And the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever."

It is clear from the biblical evidence that the concepts of justice and peace are indeed closely intertwined. They are so, however, as ideas within a whole range of concepts that can be brought together under the heading of salvation or the Kingdom of God. That is, in the eschatological consummation, all the various qualities that will charaterise the fulfilment of God's purposes will reinforce each other. So, for instance, Psalm 85.9-13 can envisage a time when the fortunes of Israel will be restored and the promises of God are manifest:

> "Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that glory may dwell in your land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. Yea, the Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and make his footsteps a road".

Here is summed up the hope of Israel, indeed the yearning of all mankind and creation itself: that is a world in prosperity and security in which relationships are those of fairness and trust, a world made and sustained by God on the basis of his covenant love.

This vision of hope is founded on God's liberating action in the saving events of the Exodus and the covenant promises that follow Israel through history. For Christian faith these are both confirmed and sustained in the cross and resurrection which fulfil and enlarge the earlier experience of Israel. At the same time it is possible to point to the sustaining power of God who has not abandoned Israel but upholds her in adversity and apostacy, in powerfulness and weakness. The point is that it is not only the eschatological promise that is God's gift. God is also the source of all true justice and peace, however fragmented, found in the vicissitudes of history. The eschatological reality is pressing in on us in the here and now.

The eschatological hope is also, however, a calling and a command. Even with inadequate tools and in mankind's sinfulness the challenge is to witness to the justice and peace of the Kingdom. There is judgement on human failure, personal and social. Yet it is possible to recognise something of this reality in how private and public affairs are conducted. It is legitimate to try to build refuges, alternatives, signs of the Kingdom in the midst of the world. So we are called to enter into the struggle for justice and peace at every level and in whatever way is given to us. This struggle does not create the Kingdom but participation in it is preparation and witness. But in relation to our central enquiry the Kingdom is not divided. There is no priority of justice over peace just as there is no priority of suffering over joy or patience over love. The attributes of the Kingdom are parts of a harmonious whole analogous to the relation between omnipotence and love or mercy and judgement in God.

III

Yet it is important to draw out the different emphases between justice and peace. In the limitations of the historical they can be set against each other and, as we have seen, given priority over each other.

Justice, or righteousness, is rooted in the justice of God shown forth in his covenant love by which he called Israel into being. In this justice there are three closely interwoven strands. In the first instance there is the recognition that God acts out of his mercy so that the "no-people" are made a "people" from a bunch of refugee slaves. This carries the implication that for Israel righteousness is care for the poor, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt" (Deut. 24.17). Secondly, God acts justly, that is without fear or favour. This is the obligation to be honest and impartial in upholding the rights of citizenship, in the execution of justice and the running of the economy. Yet thirdly, and perhaps decisively, God's justice is his fidelity. Even when Israel has abandoned him, even through exile and death, God is steadfast. So for Israel, loyalty to God and man even in adversity is the final word of justice.

Within the history of Israel it is possible to see that the different aspects of justice are severally emphasized according to circumstances, though none are lost and all are always present. In the Torah and for the pre-exilic prophets it is the nation in its political, commercial and social life that is the focus of attention. So the prophets thunder against the injustice and oppression.

> "Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream". (Amos 5.24).

Later, in dispersion and under threat of dissolution by alien cultures it is faithfulness that is at the centre of attention. Obedience to the Law becomes the saving mark of Jewishness that preserves the community as well as marking it off with its own inherent quality.

The New Testament reflects this change of circumstances but points more directly to the faithfulness of God in his act of salvation in Christ. In a sense it is a matter of starting again with the foundation of a new community. Yet the other aspects of righteousness are not forgotten. Luke draws attention to a theme that clearly goes back to Jesus, the Gospel to the poor, the weak, the women, the outcast

and sinner. He continues this in Acts where the Church is taken from the poor and lowly and persecuted. But he, with Paul and the other witnesses, struggles with the need for the qualities of biblical justice within the new community not least as a sign in the world. But above all in the New Testament it is the saving righteousness of God, his steadfast love that has broken through to open up new possibilities, overcoming the barriers between Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female (Gal. 3.28). It is indeed the love for the weak and broken for all have sinned (Rom.3.23).

All this surely means that the righteousness of the Kingdom has to find its expression and struggle to come into existence at any and every level. It will be expressed in and through the quality of life in the Church and by those prophetic figures who live heroically on the Church's behalf. It will be demanded through every means possible for expression in the laws of every land and in the lives of the people. But it will also be found in the patient justice of those under oppression or persecution who echo the longsuffering of God. And none of these can be forgotten for it is too easy to corrupt even the justice done in God's name if care is not taken to keep it whole.

IV

Peace, shalom, does indeed link in with the idea of justice. It stresses the notions of prosperity, security, freedom, lack of fear. "In that day, says the Lord of Hosts, everyone of you will invite his neighbour under his vine and under his fig tree" (Zech. 3.10). There is a freedom to get on with living because one can rely on the orderliness and stability of society.

Once more we find some movement in the Biblical material. Peace for Israel means, externally, harmonious relationships with neighbouring states so that trade and industry may prosper, or sufficent security and strength to provide stability. Internally it meant order on the basis of fair administration, equitable justice and love for neighbour, rich and poor. Jeremiah (6.14) complains bitterly about reliance on false security: "They cry peace, peace, when there is no peace." But the King is in duty bound to secure the peace of his people, by war if necessary. The constant prayer of the people is for peace (Psalm 122), and the blessing of God is peace (Num. 6.26).

It becomes noticeable that under the series of imperial conquests Israel suffered, peace becomes increasingly part of eschatological hope. Israel has no chance for peace because she has no place in the world.

In the New Testament peace and reconciliation become the central note of the Gospel. Christ is the bringer of peace (though he may equally bring conflict for peace is not bland compromise). Through him peace is made between God and man (Rom. 5.1-10). But it is a peace that is secured through long suffering, overcoming enmity with love. This means that the ministry of the Church is primarily the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5.22). The fellowship of the Church is founded on peace (Eph. 4.3). Indeed the cross is the overcoming of the barriers that have rent humanity assunder (Eph. 2.14-17). Christians are bidden to be peacemakers (Matt. 5.9; 43-48) and are commanded to live in peace and to bring peace to a world that is torn and broken (Rom. 12.18; Heb. 12.14; 1 Cor. 7.15). Twice we are told to "seek peace and ensue it" (1 Pet. 3.11; Rom. 14.19 from Ps. 34.12-16). James (3.18) indeed goes so far as to reverse the Isaiah quotation given at the beginning: "The harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace".

It would begin to appear, therefore, that far from justice being the foundation of peace, in the New Testament peace is the foundation of justice. At least the eschatological expectation of peace in the Kingdom is seen to have its own imperative in living out the Gospel. God is the God of peace both in the sense that he overcomes chaos with order and in the sense that he acts in reconciliation to bring peace into being. So, too, those who live for the Kingdom will value order over chaos (though order can and is frequently imposed or arbitary and unjust) and will see the way towards peace through acts of reconciliation (though peace making can turn out to be a struggle for a fragment of truth and love. Within the limitations of the historical this will at best be only a glimpse of true peace and perhaps a step in the right direction in a fragile balance. Nevertheless, all expressions of true peace in the world or the Church participate in the anticipation of the Kingdom, a Kingdom that will be inclusive even of those that seem to be, indeed are, enemies.

The object of this enquiry is not to set peace over against justice for clearly they are, at least eschatologically, totally interdependent. Rather it is to indicate that a proper awareness of the Biblical material, especially of peace as God's gift and as God's command has to be taken as seriously as the concept of justice. Indeed it may be that more care should be taken that they inform one another, especially in relation to Christian living within the world.

V

Briefly, in a final section, it may be possible to indicate three areas in which these considerations may be found to have practical importance. Perhaps an important implication is that much more attention needs to be given to the theology of peace. All that can be done here is to offer a few brief, programmatic remarks indicating some of the issues that may well be worked on further.

Peace and peace-making are part of the way of the cross. There is no easy solution or simple compromise to the deep-seated fears and conflicts of humanity. There can only be constant patience and energy directed by the belief that peace is desirable and possible. In the gospel this means holding at the centre of all endeavour love for the enemy who is both part of the problem and part of the solution. Those who engage in radical peace building, whether from within the conflict or as outsiders, are totally exposed to rejection and are essentially vulnerable from all sides. There is need to explore theologically the nature and methods of peacemaking and to provide a strong theological basis for the practice of peaceful living. To some extent the concern over nuclear weapons has begun to uncover some pointers in a limited way. Importantly, within this there is a need to develop a strong pastoral theology that can provide adequate support for those engaged in peacemaking. It demands living at the raw edge of existence, often very lonely, always open to rejection, walking a tight rope.

Following on from the specifically theological task are questions raised in relation to political philosophy and

theories of social action. The Gospel of peace must place a query against any absolute commitment to the inevitability let alone the desirability of violence and conflict or of exclusivist claims for any group or ideology. Yet at the same time this is not to admit an unprincipled pragmatism or unqualified endorsement of strong arm tactics in enforcing law and order. But there is implied a recognition that order, security, control of conflict, etc. is an important element in and for human development. As has been said: "Jaw, jaw is better than war, war." Such a perspective must have considerable significance for situations like Southern Africa, Northern Ireland, Lebanon or Central America in which endemic conflict seems incapable of resolution. But the answer cannot simply be found in heightened conflict any more than in a false peace but through sacrificial patience and fundamental will.

In recent decades, not least under the stimulation of Liberation Theology, we have learnt to recognise the importance of "contextualisation", that different circumstances call forth different responses to the Gospel challenge. This is surely welcome as a way of escaping from the tyranny of Western theological imperialism. However, the time may be right to ask: What is the European imperative under the Gospel? Europe is the theatre of the major conflict of ideology in the modern world. An Iron Curtain runs down the centre of the continent. It is under constant threat of nuclear war. The birth place of so much that makes the modern world is rent by national and cultural rivalries. The great need, indeed our responsiblity for the whole world, is to find ways of confidence building across the great divide. This is not to deny the reality of conflict or the complexity of the situation. Surely, however, the European Council of Churches and its member churches are right to see peacemaking as their central task, to ask for and take initiatives in relation to the Helsinki Accord. Does this not suggest that the European theological task is to develop a theology of peace not tied to a narrow activistic programme but undergirding a commitment to be engaged in the search for peace by whatever means are to hand. The Vancouver statement on Peace and Justice said: "Our approaches to justice and peace often differ... due to the wide diversity of our histories, tradition and contexts in which we live and witness"[7]. In Europe this has meant five hundred years of conflict and war between nation states and indeed between the Churches who claim to serve the Prince of Peace. It is not accidental that in our time, too, Europe has been the home of the ecumenical search for peace and unity.

St. Paul in the passage from which the title of this paper is taken describes the Kingdom of God as justice, peace and joy in the Spirit. That is the nature of God's rule over his world to which we are committed as his servants. It so happens that he goes on: "those who thus serve Christ are acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace". (Rom. 14.17-19).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1. David Gill (ed): *Gathered for Life - The Report of the Vancouver Assembly*, 1983 (W.C.C., Geneva, 1984), p. 3.
2. See e.g. J. Matthey (ed): *Your Kingdom Come - The Report of the World Mission Conference, Melbourne, 1980* (W.C.C., Geneva, 1981).
3. Gustavo Gutierrez: *The Power of the Poor in History* (S.C.M., London, 1983), p. 48, my parenthesis.
4. Jose Miguez Bonino: *Towards a Christian Political Ethics* (S.C.M., London, 1982), p. 86.
5. Ibid., p. 83.
6. Ibid., p. 84.
7. Gill, p. 130f.