

CHURCH

Seeking First the Kingdom of God

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JESUS, AFTER receiving John's baptism, experienced being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). The time in the wilderness became an extraordinary preparation for ministry. He experienced the variety of temptations (power, wealth, security), and through it all, particularly during his times of greatest trial, received the grace and blessings and care of the angels who looked after him (Matthew 4:11; Mark 1:12). Jesus came out of the wilderness, 'filled with the power of the Holy Spirit' (Luke 4:14), fired up to preach and witness to the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). Jesus dedicated his whole life to this message. He felt it was critically important for his disciples to understand it. However, Jesus' message and witness to kingdom of God power is so alien to human understanding of power that the disciples struggled to grasp his meaning. And the Church down through the ages has likewise struggled to understand—even remember—the primary position of the kingdom of God in its life.

This paper serves to highlight possible ecclesiological developments for the Church if it takes such a missional, kingdom of God-centred (regnocentric) identity to heart. The paper is divided into two parts. Part One provides a brief outline of what is understood by kingdom of God, and the relationship of the kingdom of God to the Church. Part Two provides some indicators of what a kingdom of God-centred Church may look like in today's globalised world.

PART ONE: THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

Remember to 'strive first for the kingdom of God' (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus' experience of his Father as *Abba*, the

closest translation being 'daddy', which captures the intimacy and affection of his relationship with the Father, and his vision and experience of the kingdom of God, are the two key aspects that capture his life (Fullenbach 2002, 6ff). The experience of God as *Abba* captures our human longing to rest in God's love (Augustine), our desire to feel the fullness of our living, moving and being in God. The kingdom of God is both of this world and of the world there-after. The kingdom of God is a world of peace, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, where all humanity and creation are given dignity and respect, and are embraced in love and with joy. Some have described this as a 'dream of God' captured in the vision of shalom (Fullenbach 2002, 9). Shalom means much more than the absence of war, as Fullenbach describes:

It means well-being in a comprehensive sense. It includes freedom from...oppression, anxiety, and fear, as well as the presence of...health, prosperity, and security. Shalom thus includes a social vision: the dream of a world in which such well-being belongs to everybody.

Fullenbach (2002, 9) declares, 'It is the most grandiose vision that the world has ever known' and it is this vision for which Jesus 'lived, labored, suffered, and died' and which we, his disciples, are sent to live and proclaim (John 20:21).

It is critically important that we never forget that the kingdom of God lies at the heart of Jesus' proclamation and life. It was what ignited his mission, and what led to his death. Right at the beginning of his public life, returning from his time in the wilderness Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, summarised his mission by drawing from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he

has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus kept pointing to clues of where the Kingdom was breaking through into the here and now. As such, we must take our current world seriously, as the Lord's prayer says, 'may your Kingdom come on earth' (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2). And there is also another sense that the Kingdom lies beyond ourselves—that it exists, and its fullness will come in God's own time on earth. We give ourselves humbly to the values of the Kingdom, but we know that its ultimate realisation comes as pure gift from God.

The text from Isaiah captures the heart of Jesus' message of the kingdom of God. And we, through Baptism, are called to continue to witness to and meaningfully proclaim this same message in today's world. In order to do this meaningfully, we must listen attentively to perceive the Spirit's continuing presence in the world. As Vatican II stated in the introduction to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World n.4, 'the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times' and 'must respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit' and try to 'discern in the events, the needs, and the longings which it shares with all [people] of our time, what may be genuine signs of the presence and purpose of God' (n.11).

Of course, this is no simple matter. Jesus appears to be forever challenging people to listen. He warns us to 'pay attention to how you listen' (Luke 8:18; cf. Luke 8:8). He wants his disciples to remember his stories and their meanings so as to help them to better understand God's presence in the world.

I was jolted recently when talking with my teenage daughter about Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. My daughter was struggling to remember what the idea of the kingdom of God was, and was surprised to learn that it was the central message of Jesus' mission. There may be many reasons for this, in-



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cluding that the language of 'Kingdom' is quite out-dated in today's postmodern world. However, I suspect that my daughter's lack of recall may not be uncommon and may point to a fundamental failure in family and parish (including school) catechesis on focusing on the kingdom of God as the heart of Jesus' challenge for us today.

It could also be symptomatic of a greater malaise in the Church, namely, a limited understanding of mission and the role of the Holy Spirit as 'the principal agent of mission' (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* n.30). What may seem a simplistic question, 'Does the Church have a mission?' or rather, 'Does God's Mission have a Church?' cuts to the heart of the matter. It is very easy for well-intentioned people to not even understand the fundamental difference in the questions, and so Church mission is seen as manageable, containable, doable, and dare we say, safe. We develop pastoral plans, allocate resources, and aim for improved outcomes. This is all good and not to be diminished. However, when we imagine things in terms of *missio Dei* or kingdom of God terms, the Holy Spirit can often stretch our thinking, move us to unfamiliar ideas and concerns, and lead us into places of vulnerability where we may not be safe and things may well be uncertain, and fill us with power to witness beyond our imaginings.

The Church is made up of countless numbers of stories of women and men who allowed themselves to embody a vision that knew no limits. Australia is soon to celebrate the sainthood of Mary MacKillop, an extraordinary woman who knew that the call of Jesus was

placing her at times in direct conflict with her beloved Church, even to her pain of being excommunicated. Another of recent memory is Archbishop Oscar Romero who, once he became bishop, discovered that in working to support the poor and oppressed he was directly challenging the economic and political structures that were placing intolerable burdens on the poor. He continued his heroic discipleship, placing himself at great risk, and ultimately paying the price with his life. There are thousands of known and unknown stories of people who, captivated by Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, have been called directly into the heart of God's mission.

The Relationship of the Church to the Kingdom of God

Vatican II announced very clearly that the Church exists to be a servant of the kingdom of God (cf. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n.5). Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* states: 'the Church has but one sole purpose—that the kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the whole world be accomplished.' Pope Paul VI stated even more strongly in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelisation in the Modern World* (n.8): 'Only the kingdom therefore is absolute and it makes everything else relative.' Vatican II moved away from presenting the Church as identical with the kingdom of God. Karl Rahner (1975: I, 348) captures this movement:

The Church is not identified with the Kingdom of God. It is a sacrament of the Kingdom of God in the eschatological phase of sacred history which began with Christ, the phase which brings about the Kingdom of God. As long as history lasts, the Church will not be identical with the Kingdom of God, for the latter is only definitely present when history ends with the coming of Christ and the last judgement.

This thought was developed further by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990: n.15, n.17, n.20) and in the joint statement of the Council for

Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation. Dominus Iesus* (2000), drawing from these documents puts it most clearly:

To state the inseparable relationship between Christ and the kingdom is not to overlook the fact that the kingdom of God—even if considered in its historical phase—is not identified with the church in her visible and social reality. In fact, 'the action of Christ and the Spirit outside the church's visible boundaries' must not be excluded. Therefore, one must also bear in mind that 'the kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society and the world.' (par. 19)

Vatican II and the subsequent Church teaching, has heralded a remarkable change in self-understanding of the Church. It opens up new ways of relating to others and indeed all of creation and provides fresh opportunities for the Church to make an ever more meaningful, relevant and humble contribution to the community. It can now serve as a better signpost for the world to the values and hope of the kingdom of God.

PART TWO: SIGNS OF A KINGDOM OF GOD-CENTRED CHURCH

What does this change in self-understanding, that the Church exists to serve and point towards the kingdom of God mean for us? I believe it means everything. If we took seriously that our duty is to be caught up in firstly discerning and then responding to the Holy Spirit's leadership role in God's mission our Church would be marked by great humility and courage, and an extraordinary level of vulnerability. The kingdom of God requires costly discipleship (Bonhoeffer); in short, we are challenged to put everything on the line, take up our cross and follow Christ.

For over 70% of our Church who struggle to survive in the poorest conditions of our world (the so-called Third World) this kind of discipleship comes naturally. Their concerns are for survival, security, clean water, basic

food and shelter, and perhaps then a hope of education and that unjust socio-economic and political systems that oppress them will be taken away and replaced with life-giving freedom and resources. We need to be reminded of what was boldly declared at the 1971 World Synod of Catholic Bishops that:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation (*Justice in the World* n.6).

What does costly discipleship mean for us, particularly for those of us of relatively considerable wealth? There is no doubt that Jesus made great demands on his disciples (cf. Luke 9:57-62). Some took up the invitation earnestly. Consider Peter who said 'Look, we have left everything and followed you' (Mark 10:28); and then consider the rich young man, who even though Jesus loved him and invited him into his company, could not do this because he was weighed down with great wealth (Luke 18:18-23). Some that Jesus cured were allowed to journey with him and be his disciples (Mark 10:46-52), and others he asked to go back into their communities and witness there (Mark 5:19). So on individual levels we see that Jesus places different demands on each person, understanding their particular context and time.

What does costly discipleship mean for a wealthy Western Church and how should it witness to these fundamental kingdom of God values named above? What does this mean to us in the West belonging to a globalised world, when our abilities to experience community and relatedness have never been greater, our world has never been more divided with greater wealth belonging to fewer, and extreme poverty being experienced by increasing numbers of people? This reality jars our senses.

Those in the wealthy West with any sensitivity want to make a contribution to alleviating the suffering of others. They want to share

their wealth. We see this in donations after natural disasters (Indonesia, Haiti). We notice ever-increasing numbers of people doing short-term voluntary work with agencies in the Third World, and we note that many of these volunteers come from non-Church backgrounds, and many of them are young. We think back on the witness of heroic men and women who saw suffering and injustice and decided to dedicate their whole life to prayer and service of the poorest of the poor (consider Francis of Assisi, Dorothy Day).

There is a growing sense that many desire to have demands placed on them, and they will willingly respond, particularly if this draws them into authentic relationship and meaning for life. As such, the Church has an important role in providing clear and accurate information on what is happening in the world, and encouraging people to contribute to alleviating such unnecessary suffering.

But words are not enough. As Pope Paul VI put it so well, people 'more willingly listen to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* n. 41). While the role of proclamation is not diminished it has far more power within a context of authentic witness (cf. Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 352ff). So what does this mean for our Church and its future? We have argued strongly that the Church must be animated by its commitment to serving the kingdom of God, a kingdom characterised by values of justice, peace, non-violence, table-fellowship and celebration, friendship with the stranger, fearless denunciation of unjust practices and systems, and care for the poor and oppressed.

If this is what we are called to be and do, what are signs and ways of authentic witness in today's Church? How do we use our time and resources (financial, human and material) to serve the kingdom of God? I am often struck by the fact that in our busy world, time sometimes, even more than money, is what we are reluctant to 'give away.' The time to talk with or acknowledge the stranger, or even time to

be with our friends, family members and work colleagues, seems to becoming harder for increasing numbers of people. Unjust work practices of twelve-hour working shifts, or low salaries requiring long hours of work, all combine to make such time difficult to come by. However, there is also an assault on our time by a culture that is increasingly bombarding people with distractions (radio, television, computers, iPods, to name a few) and consumer 'needs' that can eventually alienate people from each other, and certainly do not satisfy the spiritual hunger in our hearts.

Closely connected to time as a precious resource are our financial and human resources (staff and volunteers). How are kingdom of God values of care for the poor, lonely and marginalised, actions for social justice and reconciliation, love of all of God's creation, celebration of our liturgical and social life, life-long education in the richness of our faith Tradition and the religious traditions of others, reflected in our financial and human resource planning? The following are some trends of what a Church committed to serving the kingdom of God may look like.

A reflective and discerning Church

The Church is called to witness to Jesus' demand that we 'listen' to and for God's movement in our world and life. Frequently, commencing with his initial forty days in the wilderness, Jesus went to quiet and remote places for rest, prayer and communion with his Abba/Father (Mark 1:35, 6:31, Luke 4:42). Our Church, with its long tradition of retreats and quiet reflection (including adoration) is well-positioned to be able to mentor and nurture such practices in families and individuals, and in the vast array of sodalities and ministry groups that come together for the mission of God.

Living out the call of baptism: lifelong faith education and formation

Through baptism each member of the Church is called to fully enter into the life of discipleship. It is not acceptable that there be

passive members of a Church, simply attending the sacraments as if it is a private affair. Our Church needs to be marked by dynamic preaching from its clergy, and ongoing adult faith education and pastoral formation for all to enable each person to better understand their baptismal responsibilities so as to witness with increased power to God's love for and concern for the world. The Church will be marked by an educated and dynamic laity working side by side with the clergy, where power is shared and individual and communal gifts are nurtured and encouraged.

Sharing of resources with the poor and action with the poor

A kingdom of God focused Church has its eyes on the poorest of the poor in the local and wider community. All are to be swept up in this ministry, each giving financially what they can, and each giving of their time to activities that work not only to alleviate material suffering, but also to develop relationships and friendships through all strata of society. St Paul painted a picture of there being total equality between men and women, Jew and Gentile, *etc* (Galatians 3:28). We are called to break down such barriers. Our Church is called to become more and more a light among the nations by being a prophet of hope and to fearlessly proclaim the need for justice, peace and reconciliation.

Dialogue and listening—deeply ecumenical

As noted earlier, Vatican II was a watershed in the Church's understanding of salvation. We now understand that salvation is indeed possible outside the Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church n.16, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relations of the Church to non-Christian Religions n. 2), and that we have much to appreciate about God's movement within the lives and traditions of others. Focusing on the kingdom of God means that we are called to work with all people of good will to alleviate suffering in the world. This will challenge us

to learn from others, through dialogue—and this requires deep listening, to share with others our faith, and to enter into the vulnerable place of the Spirit leading us all into new life and understanding. As Richard McBrien (2008, 368) affirms: ‘Ecclesiology has begun to assume an interfaith as well as an ecumenical character.’

Hospitality to all

Welcome to the stranger is a key motif in the gospels. This is hard work for us and stretches us beyond our comfort zones. We can take comfort that there were times in the gospels where it appears Jesus was challenged on this as well (cf. the story of the Syrophenician woman Mark 7:25-30; Matthew 15:21-28). The Church is called to establish sociologically and culturally appropriate structures that enable the stranger to be seen and heard and become known, not to be an alien within a large body that can easily be hidden—or worse—ignored.

Inculturation: celebrating life and mission—Eucharist

Our liturgical life needs to reflect the ‘coming in’ and ‘going out’ movement of Mission. It is important that the Church emphasises that Eucharist is not an end in itself; that we never lose sight that Eucharist serves Mission. We bring to our liturgies, particularly in the Eucharist, the cares and concerns of the world. We seek forgiveness and healing and reconciliation for our failures in being true to God’s demands. And through the Eucharist we are nourished and given courage and hope to go back into the world to continue our commitment to God’s mission in the world (cf. Schroeder 2008, 115). To be sure, the Eucharist will always be the centrepiece of our liturgical and community life, but it is the centrepiece only because it feeds us for God’s mission.

As Eucharist is the one activity in which the local Church gathers it is essential that it be celebrated in a culturally meaningful way. We now refer to this as inculturation, also re-

ferred to as contextualisation. Inculturation captures the ‘dynamic interaction between the gospel and Church tradition on the one hand, and the changing social and cultural context on the other’ (Shroeder 2008, 122). The Church has long understood the importance of this. Bevans and Schroeder (2004, 192) highlight that in 1659 the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith alerted missionaries going into foreign lands:

Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their manners, customs, and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religious and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain, Italy, or some other European country to China? Do not introduce all that to them, but only the faith, which does not destroy the manners and customs of any people... but rather wishes to see them preserved and unharmed... Do not draw invidious contrast between the customs of the peoples and those of Europe; do your utmost to adapt yourselves to them.

Vatican II recognised the critical importance of people’s culture and identity. The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, highlighted that the Church ‘must implant itself... in the same way that Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the [people] among who he lived’ (n.10). And in n.11 the Council taught that all Christians ‘should be familiar with their national and religious traditions and uncover with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them.’ Following on from the Council, Pope Paul VI in 1969 proclaimed in Uganda that, ‘you may, and you must, have an African Christianity’ (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 386). Pope John Paul II continued to develop this thinking and demanded that indigenous cultures be respected and that the Church willingly and joyfully receive such contribution to the life of the Church (cf. Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Alice Springs, Australia, n.12-13).

Inculturation of the liturgy is critical if the

Eucharist is to be meaningfully celebrated in the diverse cultures and contexts of our world Church, and the celebration of the Eucharist in particular goes to the heart of our ecclesiological identity, because it is 'expressive of the nature, mission, ministerial life, and structural operations of the Church' (McBrien 2008, 371). This is why the issue of inculturation of the liturgy is currently a very hot topic (cf. McBrien 2008, 166ff).

We know that inculturation is never easy, as Pope John Paul II cautioned, the process of inculturation is indeed a 'lengthy,' 'difficult and delicate task.' Nevertheless, a kingdom of God-centred Church will be one which recognises and esteems human culture, drawing it into the heart of her liturgical life, and enabling the gospel to make even deeper roots in the cultures of the world.

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All these signposts point to a Church that is fully committed to living out its call into the *missio Dei*. It will be drawing from the deep riches of the Tradition, being Eucharistic centred, and a Church deeply rooted in the Word of God. It will also be radically centred on the call of Baptism that all equally share in this mission, and together all are called to proclaim and witness to the values of the kingdom of God. The Church will be marked by humility, forgiveness and reconciliation, heroic and mundane daily acts, and a community life of extraordinary hospitality where people come together and go out together on mission full of love for the Lord, the poor, and all of creation.

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