

## 32 Jesus Kyrios

24: 44 - 53

When angels thronged the nite proclaiming peace upon earth, it wasn't just a sentimental wish to be commemorated once a year in an exchange of greetings. It was the proclamation of God's ultimate decision, of God's good will for humankind, announced from heven. Because God is God, humankind could oppose that proclamation, but not thwart it. All that human history can do from that time on is to confront it, fiting or accepting it.

But even we who believe fail to see its significance. We recognise that when Gabriel announced the conception of Zechariah's son, he would be born in nine months, in spite of Zechariah's doubts. That when he told Miriam of the child she would conceive, it would be so, in spite of Miriam's puzzlement about a sex partner. That when the angels sang glory to God, it was because glory alreedy redounds to God in God's great acts. But when we hear "peace on earth" – well, that's God's benign intention, but don't expect it to go anywhere. We don't believe it.

And yet it is a proclamation like the others, and it will be implemented: peace on earth, freedom from fear, confusion and hostility, space and time for growth and fulfilment, for order and liberty. The shalom of God, salaam, the well-being and the well-working of the whole human order, will be. God has decreed it. It was the angels' good news for all the people. It is the good news of Jesus the Lord.

When the risen Jesus showed himself to his disciples, gathered in a room in Jerusalem, he sed,

"This is what I told you when I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms had to be fulfilled." Then he opened their mind to understand the scriptures. "So it was written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. In his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sin would be proclaimed to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of this. I will send upon you the promised gift of my Father, and you must wait in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (24: 44 - 49)

In his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all the nations. If we have come thru the gospel unscathed, our basic mind-set untouched by its story, we will think we know what this means, and very comfortable we will be with the message. But I hope we have not and are not. We know now that the repentance preached is the repentance not just of individuals changing their private behavior, but of people changing their public behavior and the people, society or the nation, changing in consequence. It is the repentance of Zacchaeus, resulting in a significant new approach to tax-farming in Jericho. It is the repentance of the functionaries, the corrupt police and the tax-takers, as well as the repentance of the sinner woman who was forgiven much and so loved to extravagance, or the practical but true repentance of the wastrel son. Repentance is a turning of the heart to God, but the whole heart, not the heart less those parts that are dedicated to family, class or country. And so it is repentance for the whole people, a repentance that calls on the whole people to take part. The heart that has turned to God will pull the whole of society with it, as far as its ties with society extend, and if society does not want to be pulled, it will act to eradicate the influence.

Once, the promise to Abraham was fulfilled by rescuing his descendants from Egypt, making them a nation and giving them a law to live by; but Israel did not live by the law of God and in vain the prophets warned and pleaded for faithfulness, integrity and justice. The law itself became a prop for selfishness and pride, a tool of oppression, and those who claimed to honor it most, the Pharisees, the lawyers, the priests, disregarded its call to love, justice and compassion. Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

But now the covenant of God is fulfilled and recast in the only way it can ever be the covenant of salvation, as a covenant of forgiveness for sin. Again the story has come full circle, only this time the difference is much greater, a radical difference made to the nature of the promise that binds God and God's people. When John preached repentance and forgiveness, it was in preparation for the coming of God's rule, when all would be judged. Now repentance and forgiveness is the result of the coming of God's rule. Jesus is risen, the Son of Man is manifest, the rule of the Son of God has begun, and so repentance and forgiveness is possible: a possibility, an offer, a hope now not only for Israel but for all the nations.

Jesus too had preached repentance, and in God's name he had forgiven sin. That turning to God, the wish to be forgiven, was all that God required. There was no condition, no penance, no ritual; Jesus did not even baptise, like John. It was entirely a matter of the heart. The heart turns to God and God, the prodigal Father, forgives. When the weak and sick came to him,

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they were healed; when the repentant turned to him with contrition and hope, they were forgiven. Now his disciples will proclaim that forgiveness to all the nations and the nations' repentance will be the triumph of the kingdom of God, the dawning of salvation.

The kingdom of God does not come in victory to condemn those who are not equal to it, for all of Israel and the "best" of its leaders, and even the disciples of Jesus, are unequal to it. The rule of God, the reign of the Son of Man, is peace on earth, and that peace is possible only in the forgiveness of God; for people and nations do not keep the law, but the forgiveness of God flows freely, unconditionally, wherever the world will turn away from its sin. Zechariah was right to move from thoughts of victory and peace to thoughts of forgiveness and peace.

The son of Man reigns and the risen Jesus is triumphant precisely in the sending of his disciples to preach repentance and forgiveness for sin. For the kingdom of God does not stand separate from and immune to the weakness of humanity, but engages with it, even as it comes in glory. And it does come in glory. Jesus told his followers to wait in the city until they received the power from on high. The angels had sung "Glory to God in the highest" and now, from on high, the gift of God is coming, confirming the rule of the Son of God. The Son of Man has entered into his glory, and "glory shone around".

Am I wrong after all? About power, I mean. For the disciples are told to wait "until they receive power from on high". Luke, it seems, did not have with his Greek the problem I have with English. He is able to speak of "dunamis", power, because the Greek word seems to be, for him, free of the heavy associations of force and control that "power" now carries in English. Luke can speak of "dunamis" in a sense defined by the practice of Jesus himself. It does not bring in wealth or weaponry – what we know as commercial, economic, political and military power – but will always be, as it was in Jesus, the power that is powerless before that array, yet still lives as energy, strength and adventure, long after they have done their worst and exhausted their resources.

Perhaps the common Greek of his day was richer and more flexible with words for "power" – I appeal to the scholars to sort that out for me. But in English we have a word so dangerously overloaded with negativity disguised as positive, that I don't know how we can use it in connection with the gift and the character of God. I prefer to say "energy", "strength" or "adventure". But there's no single good and adequate word, so we sometimes have to say "power". I hope we will remember how utterly alien to it is most of what we

usually mean by the word. The very death and resurrection of Jesus mark the distance between the meanings.

That “power from on high” is the gift of God’s Spirit, the life of God breathed into us, to make us, as we saw, heroes, leaders, rulers and servants in spite of ourselves. Much is written about the Spirit in Paul and in the gospel of John. But Luke does not give us their insights. He gives us what Jesus said, in the light of the long experience of Israel, the “Old” Testament, a rich and powerful understanding of God’s gift, which should not be set aside because what we know from Paul or John is deeper psychologically or more richly analytic.

Jesus’ disciples are to receive “power from on high”. They will receive the Spirit of God, to enable them to carry out the task of ruling his world. It will put them in charge of the household, to give them their food in due season; it will make them responsible for the world and good order in it, and give them the strength and energy to see the adventure through. This is the Spirit that Jesus received after his baptism, confirming him as the Son of God, the Spirit who filled him with joy at the height of his mission, flooding him with an understanding of God his Father, and the ways of God so different to the visions of the world.<sup>1</sup> It is the Spirit he told them to ask for, so that the liberating work of God can be done in the world.

Luke’s gospel ends with the disciples, for its ending is the beginning of their commission. The Spirit they are to receive will ensure that the rule of God is spread throughout the nations, not by the reach of dominating power, but as vision and energy made freely available to the peoples who repent, who are willing to face God and change their ways in the light of the overwhelming reality that God is. The Spirit of God will be the very breath, life and energy of God making real the covenant that is already real in the history of Israel; making real the rule of God, the kingdom, which, in Jesus Kyrios, is utterly real and unquenchable; making real and effective the commission of his apostles, to go to the world with the promise of the kingdom, which is now for all.

From now on they, and disciples after them, will be responsible, for although this is the work of the energy of God, in which Jesus rules, he rules by enabling, empowering, the ones who believe in him. As they believe and go out in faith, doing as he tells them, as they fulfil the whole Law of God in utter love of God and generous love of their neighbor, as they pray for the coming of God’s kingdom and the ending of sin, injustice, oppression, the

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<sup>1</sup> 10: 21 - 24

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world will see that the rule of God has come and the way of salvation is open before our feet.

We are to be messengers of the kingdom, not as some indefinitely future event, not even, as it was for John, a fearfully imminent event, but as an event already launched upon the world. It is no longer repentance in the face of something to come later, but repentance, a change of life and lifestyle, because the power of God is already loose in the world, because Jesus is risen, because the Messiah, the Son of God, is already revealed, because the Son of Man has entered into his glory, and we have seen it.

Repentance is no longer just for Jews who have broken the Law of God, but for the whole world, which must change and be radically different because now is the forgiveness of sins. The kingdom, the rule of God, is that compassionate, forgiving outreach, and those who proclaim it will be the judges, the administrators, the rulers enthroned to give the world what Jesus the Lord has given them, to serve the world as he has served among them.

We think of evangelism as Christians telling the world about forgiveness of sins and salvation in heaven thru the atoning death of Jesus, and so it is. But that is not all it is, and not as it is described in the gospel written by Luke. Evangelism, spreading the good news, is showing the world the way to peace, to a truly good and liberating order of society: the way that Jesus taught. Showing the nations that we already have the energy and the resources we need: the spirit of God. That even when the way lies thru crucifixion, it is the way, and God has already guaranteed the end.

The Christian message, the whole of the good news – the full gospel – would have an appeal very like that of Marxism, if only we had the courage to tell it: a vision of the wholeness of the world, humankind set free from its chains, domination and exploitation overthrown to make way for solidarity, friendship and hope; money replaced by love; and the utter conviction that no matter how much we are set back and suffer and die, this revolution cannot fail. For the way has already been spelt out with utter authority; the love and liberation have been lived and seen; the depth of the pain has already been endured in the shame and defeat of the cross; and we have seen the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.

Far from being the opium of the people, the gospel is the call that wakes them, stirs them to action, and puts before them the adventure and the energy of God, to transform the world. It is only we Christians who have drugged our hearers, hiding from them the full force of the gospel that we

haven't the courage to believe ourselves. When Marxism dies, exhausted at last and broken by its own contradictions, and when all the revolutionary fervor of the twentieth century has petered out, when we no longer know of anything worth dying for or living for, and all the hopes of a revolutionary new world are a tattered mockery, the light of the gospel shines, telling us still, as quietly and firmly as it always did, that the powerful will tumble from their thrones and the rich will slink away empty-handed, that the poor will be lifted up and the hungry filled. The fervor of the gospel is unabated, and it invites us, entices us, to begin again, to repent and believe the good news of the kingdom.

Pusillanimous wee things, we have been overawed by the power of the world, of money and weapons and propaganda, as if power was the issue. We have spoken only of a half-gospel, where Jesus has done all the dying, and does not try to change the power-systems that are now in charge. We will not face the batons of the British colonial police, or the tanks of the People's Liberation Army. And yet we are the disciples of Jesus. Huddled here in bewilderment, wondering whether a cataclysmic change in climate, or war, or economic melt-down, or the drying up of our energy sources will end it all, we cannot see the Lord who rules us, and calls us to be his disciples, to lose our fears and to receive from God the vision, energy and adventure of God's kingdom.

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The story ends where it began, in the temple of Jerusalem. Only the temple is now a different place and Jerusalem is now a different city. The hopes of Jerusalem are fulfilled and the days of the temple are numbered, but for now, it is the place of Jesus' disciples. No longer are we looking at the chosen priest offering incense in the innermost sanctuary, but ordinary lay people praising God in the public courts. The temple constructed by the impious first Herod, in years that were numbered by the kings that ruled them, will soon pass away, because all that the Temple stood for – the true Temple of God – has been fulfilled. Now is the year of Jesus the Kyrios, and time is dated by the One who is risen from the dead.

We his disciples and followers must now face the world, which might kill us, and will certainly resist us. But we face it in the strength and energy of God, no longer, let us pray, to be numbed by its platitudes or taken in by its bluster and frightened by its power. We are called and emboldened to be the children of God, to manage with the authority of God, to serve the world as Jesus' disciples and to proclaim repentance to the nations, whose salvation is the peace of God under the rule of Jesus the teacher and Kyrios.