

II

*“His Kingdom First”*

## *INTRODUCTION*

Jesus does not respond to our worry-filled way of living by saying that we should not be so busy with worldly affairs. He does not try to pull us away from the many events, activities, and people that make up our lives. He does not tell us that what we do is unimportant, valueless, or useless. Nor does he suggest that we should withdraw from our involvements and live quiet, restful lives removed from the struggles of the world.

Jesus' response to our worry-filled lives is

quite different. He asks us to shift the point of gravity, to relocate the center of our attention, to change our priorities. Jesus wants us to move from the "many things" to the "one necessary thing." It is important for us to realize that Jesus in no way wants us to leave our many-faceted world. Rather, he wants us to live in it, but firmly rooted in the center of all things. Jesus does not speak about a change of activities, a change in contacts, or even a change of pace. He speaks about a change of heart. This change of heart makes everything different, even while everything appears to remain the same. This is the meaning of "Set your hearts on his kingdom first . . . and all these other things will be given you as well." What counts is where our hearts are. When we worry, we have our hearts in the wrong place. Jesus asks us to move our hearts to the center, where

all other things fall into place.

What is this center? Jesus calls it the kingdom, the kingdom of his Father. For us of the twentieth century, this may not have much meaning. Kings and kingdoms do not play an important role in our daily life. But only when we understand Jesus' words as an urgent call to make the life of God's Spirit our priority can we see better what is at stake. A heart set on the Father's kingdom is also a heart set on the spiritual life. To set our hearts on the kingdom therefore means to make the life of the Spirit within and among us the center of all we think, say, or do.

I now want to explore in some depth this life in the Spirit. First we need to see how in Jesus' own life the Spirit of God manifests itself. Then we need to discern what it means for us to be called by Jesus to enter with him into this life of the Spirit.

## *JESUS' LIFE*

There is little doubt that Jesus' life was a very busy life. He was busy teaching his disciples, preaching to the crowds, healing the sick, exorcising demons, responding to questions from foes and friends, and moving from one place to another. Jesus was so involved in activities that it became difficult to have any time alone. The following story gives us the picture: "They brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils. . . . In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and

his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighboring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came.' And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils" (Mark 1:32-39).

It is clear from this account that Jesus had a very filled life and was seldom if ever left alone. He might even appear to us as a fanatic driven by a compulsion to get his message across at any cost. The truth, however, is different. The deeper we enter into the Gospel accounts of his life, the more we see that Jesus was not a zealot trying to accomplish many different things in order to reach a self-imposed goal. On the contrary, everything we know about Jesus indicates that he was concerned with only one thing: to do the will

of his Father. Nothing in the Gospels is as impressive as Jesus' single-minded obedience to his Father. From his first recorded words in the Temple, "Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" (Luke 2:49), to his last words on the cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46), Jesus' only concern was to do the will of his Father. He says, "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). The works Jesus did are the works the Father sent him to do, and the words he spoke are the words the Father gave him. He leaves no doubt about this: "If I am not doing my Father's work, there is no need to believe me . . ." (John 10:37); "My word is not my own; it is the word of the one who sent me" (John 14:24).

Jesus is not our Savior simply because of

what he said to us or did for us. He is our Savior because what he said and did was said and done in obedience to his Father. That is why St. Paul could say, "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Jesus is the obedient one. The center of his life is this obedient relationship with the Father. This may be hard for us to understand, because the word *obedience* has so many negative connotations in our society. It makes us think of authority figures who impose their wills against our desires. It makes us remember unhappy childhood events or hard tasks performed under threats of punishment. But none of this applies to Jesus' obedience. His obedience means a total, fearless listening to his loving Father. Between the Father and the Son there is only love. Everything that be-

longs to the Father, he entrusts to the Son (Luke 10:22), and everything the Son has received, he returns to the Father. The Father opens himself totally to the Son and puts everything in his hands: all knowledge (John 12:50), all glory (John 8:54), all power (John 5:19-21). And the Son opens himself totally to the Father and thus returns everything into his Father's hands. "I came from the Father and have come into the world and now I leave the world to go to the Father" (John 16:28).

This inexhaustible love between the Father and the Son includes and yet transcends all forms of love known to us. It includes the love of a father and mother, a brother and sister, a husband and wife, a teacher and friend. But it also goes far beyond the many limited and limiting human experiences of love we know. It is a caring yet demanding

love. It is a supportive yet severe love. It is a gentle yet strong love. It is a love that gives life yet accepts death. In this divine love Jesus was sent into the world, to this divine love Jesus offered himself on the cross. This all-embracing love, which epitomizes the relationship between the Father and the Son, is a divine Person, coequal with the Father and the Son. It has a personal name. It is called the Holy Spirit. The Father loves the Son and pours himself out in the Son. The Son is loved by the Father and returns all he is to the Father. The Spirit is love itself, eternally embracing the Father and the Son.

This eternal community of love is the center and source of Jesus' spiritual life, a life of uninterrupted attentiveness to the Father in the Spirit of love. It is from this life that Jesus' ministry grows. His eating and fasting, his praying and acting, his traveling and resting,

his preaching and teaching, his exorcising and healing, were all done in this Spirit of love. We will never understand the full meaning of Jesus' richly varied ministry unless we see how the many things are rooted in the one thing: listening to the Father in the intimacy of perfect love. When we see this, we will also realize that the goal of Jesus' ministry is nothing less than to bring us into this most intimate community.

#### *OUR LIVES*

Our lives are destined to become like the life of Jesus. The whole purpose of Jesus' ministry is to bring us to the house of his Father. Not only did Jesus come to free us from the bonds of sin and death, he also came to lead us into the intimacy of his divine

life. It is difficult for us to imagine what this means. We tend to emphasize the distance between Jesus and ourselves. We see Jesus as the all-knowing and all-powerful Son of God who is unreachable for us sinful, broken human beings. But in thinking this way, we forget that Jesus came to give us his own life. He came to lift us up into loving community with the Father. Only when we recognize the radical purpose of Jesus' ministry will we be able to understand the meaning of the spiritual life. Everything that belongs to Jesus is given for us to receive. All that Jesus does we may also do. Jesus does not speak about us as second-class citizens. He does not withhold anything from us: "I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father" (John 15:15); "Whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself" (John 14:12). Jesus wants us to be

where he is. In his priestly prayer, he leaves no doubt about his intentions: "Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you. . . . I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one that the world will realize . . . that I have loved them as much as you loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you have given me. . . . I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them" (John 17:21-26).

These words beautifully express the nature of Jesus' ministry. He became like us so that we might become like him. He did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself

and became as we are so that we might become like him and thus share in his divine life.

This radical transformation of our lives is the work of the Holy Spirit. The disciples could hardly comprehend what Jesus meant. As long as Jesus was present to them in the flesh, they did not yet recognize his full presence in the Spirit. That is why Jesus said: "It is for your own good that I am going because unless I go, the Advocate [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I do go, I will send him to you. . . . When the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learned; and he will tell you of the things to come. He will glorify me, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything the Father has is mine; that is why I said: All he tells you will



be taken from what is mine” (John 16:7, 13–15).

Jesus sends the Spirit so that we may be led to the full truth of the divine life. *Truth* does not mean an idea, concept, or doctrine, but the true relationship. To be led into the truth is to be led into the same relationship that Jesus has with the Father; it is to enter into a divine betrothal.

Thus Pentecost is the completion of Jesus’ mission. On Pentecost the fullness of Jesus’ ministry becomes visible. When the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples and dwells with them, their lives are transformed into Christ-like lives, lives shaped by the same love that exists between the Father and the Son. The spiritual life is indeed a life in which we are lifted up to become partakers of the divine life.

To be lifted up into the divine life of the

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit does not mean, however, to be taken out of the world. On the contrary, those who have entered into the spiritual life are precisely the ones who are sent into the world to continue and fulfill the work that Jesus began. The spiritual life does not remove us from the world but leads us deeper into it. Jesus says to his Father, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). He makes it clear that precisely because his disciples no longer belong to the world, they can live in the world as he did: “I am not asking you to remove them from the world, but to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world” (John 17:15–16). Life in the Spirit of Jesus is therefore a life in which Jesus’ coming into the world—his incarnation, his death, and resurrection—is lived out

by those who have entered into the same obedient relationship to the Father which marked Jesus' own life. Having become sons and daughters as Jesus was Son, our lives become a continuation of Jesus' mission.

"Being in the world without being of the world." These words summarize well the way Jesus speaks of the spiritual life. It is a life in which we are totally transformed by the Spirit of love. Yet it is a life in which everything seems to remain the same. To live a spiritual life does not mean that we must leave our families, give up our jobs, or change our ways of working; it does not mean that we have to withdraw from social or political activities, or lose interest in literature and art; it does not require severe forms of asceticism or long hours of prayer. Changes such as these may in fact grow out of our spiritual life, and for some people radi-

cal decisions may be necessary. But the spiritual life can be lived in as many ways as there are people. What is new is that we have moved from the many things to the kingdom of God. What is new is that we are set free from the compulsions of our world and have set our hearts on the only necessary thing. What is new is that we no longer experience the many things, people, and events as endless causes for worry, but begin to experience them as the rich variety of ways in which God makes his presence known to us.

Indeed, living a spiritual life requires a change of heart, a conversion. Such a conversion may be marked by a sudden inner change, or it can take place through a long, quiet process of transformation. But it always involves an inner experience of oneness. We realize that we are in the center, and that from there all that is and all that takes place

can be seen and understood as part of the mystery of God's life with us. Our conflicts and pains, our tasks and promises, our families and friends, our activities and projects, our hopes and aspirations, no longer appear to us as a fatiguing variety of things which we can barely keep together, but rather as affirmations and revelations of the new life of the Spirit in us. "All these other things," which so occupied and preoccupied us, now come as gifts or challenges that strengthen and deepen the new life which we have discovered. This does not mean that the spiritual life makes things easier or takes our struggles and pains away. The lives of Jesus' disciples clearly show that suffering does not diminish because of conversion. Sometimes it even becomes more intense. But our attention is no longer directed to the "more or less." What matters is to listen attentively to the

Spirit and to go obediently where we are being led, whether to a joyful or a painful place.

Poverty, pain, struggle, anguish, agony, and even inner darkness may continue to be part of our experience. They may even be God's way of purifying us. But life is no longer boring, resentful, depressing, or lonely because we have come to know that everything that happens is part of our way to the house of the Father.

#### *CONCLUSION*

"His kingdom first." I hope that these words have received some new meaning. They call us to follow Jesus on his obedient way, to enter with him into the community established by the demanding love of the

Father, and to live all of life from there. The kingdom is the place where God's Spirit guides us, heals us, challenges us, and renews us continuously. When our hearts are set on that kingdom, our worries will slowly move to the background, because the many things which made us worry so much start to fall into place. It is important to realize that "setting your heart on the kingdom" is not a method for winning prizes. In that case the spiritual life would become like winning the jackpot on a TV game show. The words "all other things will be given you as well" express that indeed God's love and care extend to our whole being. When we set our hearts on the life in the Spirit of Christ, we will come to see and understand better how God keeps us in the palm of his hand. We will come to a better understanding of what we truly need for our physical and mental well-

being, and we will come to experience the intimate connections between our spiritual life and our temporal needs while journeying through his world.

But this leaves us with a very difficult question. Is there a way to move from our worry-filled life to the life of the Spirit? Must we simply wait passively until the Spirit comes along and blows away our worries? Are there any ways by which we can prepare ourselves for the life of the Spirit and deepen that life once it has touched us? The distance between the filled yet unfulfilled life on the one hand, and the spiritual life on the other, is so great that it may seem quite unrealistic to expect to move from one to another. The claims that daily living makes on us are so real, so immediate, and so urgent that a life in the Spirit seems beyond our capabilities.

My description of the worry-filled life and

the spiritual life as the two extremes of the spectrum of living was necessary to make clear what is at stake. But most of us are neither worrying constantly nor absorbed solely in the Spirit. Often there are flashes of the presence of God's Spirit in the midst of our worries, and often worries arise even when we experience the life of the Spirit in our innermost self. It is important that we gradually realize where we are and learn how we can let the life of God's Spirit grow stronger in us.

This brings me to the final task: to describe the main disciplines which can support us in our desire to have our worries lose their grip on us, and to let the Spirit guide us to the true freedom of the children of God.

*"Set Your Hearts"*