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Father Cantalamessa on the Kingdom of God

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, JULY 6, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on the readings from this Sunday's liturgy.

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The Kingdom of God is at Hand!

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 66:10-14c; Galatians 6:16-18; Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

Again we will comment on Sunday's Gospel with the help of Benedict XVI's book on Jesus. First, however, I would like to make an observation of a general nature. The criticism that has been made of the Pope's book by some is that it sticks to what the Gospels say without taking into account the findings of modern historical research which, according to them, would lead to very different conclusions.

What we have here is a widespread idea that is nourishing a whole literature like Dan Brown's "Da Vinci Code" and popularizing historical works based on the same presupposition.

I think that it is important to shed light on a fundamental equivocation in all of this. The idea of an historical investigation into Jesus that is unified, rectilinear, that moves unswervingly toward completely illuminating him, is a pure myth that some are trying to convince people of but which no serious historian today believes possible.

I quote one of the more well-known representatives of historical research on Jesus, the American Paula Fredriksen: "In recent scholarship, Jesus has been imagined and presented as a type of first-century shaman figure; as a Cynic-sort of wandering wise man; as a visionary radical and social reformer preaching egalitarian ethics to the destitute; as a Galilean regionalist alienated from the elitism of Judean religious conventions (like Temple and Torah); as a champion of national liberation and, on the contrary, as its opponent and critic -- on and on.

"All these figures are presented with rigorous academic argument and methodology; all are defended with appeals to the ancient data. Debate continues at a roiling pitch, and consensus -- even on issues so basic as what constitutes evidence and how to construe it -- seems a distant hope."

Often an appeal is made to new data and recent discoveries which would finally put historical research in an advantageous place with regard to the past. But the variety of the consequences that can be drawn from these new historical sources appears from the fact that they have given rise to two opposed and irreconcilable images of Christ that are still in play. On one hand, a Jesus who "is in all and for all Jewish"; on the other hand, a Jesus who is a child of the Hellenized Galilee of his time, strongly influenced the philosophy of cynicism.

In light of this fact I ask: What was the Pope supposed to do, compose yet another historical reconstruction in which all the contrary objections debate and combat each other? What the Pope chose to do was to positively present the figure and teaching of Jesus as he is understood by the Church, taking his point of departure from the conviction that the Christ of the Gospels is, even from the historical point of view, the figure that is the most credible and certain.

After these clarifications, let us turn to this Sunday's Gospel. It is the episode of the sending out of 72 disciples on mission. After having told them how they are supposed to go out (two by two, like lambs, without money), Jesus explains to them what they must say: "Tell them: 'The kingdom of God is at hand.'"

We know that the phrase "The kingdom of God is at hand" is at the heart of Jesus' preaching and is the premise of each of his teachings. The kingdom of God is at hand, so love your enemies; the kingdom of God is at hand, so if your hand is a scandal to you, cut it off. It is better to enter the kingdom of God without a hand than to remain outside of it with both hands. Everything takes its meaning from the kingdom.

There has always been discussion about what, precisely, Jesus meant by the expression "kingdom of God." For some it would be a purely interior kingdom consisting in a life conformed to the law of God; for others, on the contrary, it would be a social and political kingdom to be realized by man, even by struggle and revolution if necessary.

The Pope reviews these various interpretations of the past and points to what they have in common: The center of interest moves from God to man; it is no longer a kingdom of God but a kingdom of man, who is its principal architect. This is an idea of a kingdom that, at the limit, is also compatible with atheism.

In Jesus' preaching the coming of the kingdom of God means that, sending his Son into the world, God has decided, so to speak, to personally take in hand the fortunes of the world, to compromise himself with it, to act in the world from the inside. It is easier to intuit what the kingdom of God means than to explain it because it is a reality that transcends every explanation.

The idea is still much diffused that Jesus expected the end of the world to be imminent and therefore the kingdom of God that he preached is not to be realized in this world but in the one we call the "hereafter."

In effect, the Gospels contain some affirmations that lend themselves to this interpretation. But if we look at the whole of Jesus' teaching this does not jibe. According to C.H. Dodd, Jesus' teaching is not an ethics for those who are expecting a rapid end to the world, but for those who have experienced the end of this world and the coming into it of the kingdom of God.

It is for those who know that "the old things are past" and that the world has become a "new creation," since God has descended as king. In other words, Jesus did not announce the end of "the" world but the end of "a" world, and in that the facts have not told against him.

But John the Baptist also preached this change, speaking of an imminent judgment of God. In what, then, consists the newness of Christ? The newness is entirely enclosed within an adverb of time: "now." With Jesus the kingdom of God is no longer only something "imminent." It is present. "The new and exclusive message of Jesus," the Pope writes, "consists in the fact that he says: God acts now -- this is the hour in which God, in a way that goes beyond all previous modalities, reveals himself in history as its Lord, as the living God."

From here flows that sense of urgency that is present in all of Jesus' parables, especially the so-called parables of the kingdom. The decisive moment of history has arrived, now is the moment to make the decision that saves; the feast is ready; to refuse to enter because you have just taken a wife or bought a pair of oxen or for

some other reason, is to be excluded forever and see your place taken by others.

From this last reflection let us move to a practical and contemporary application of the message we have heard. What Jesus said to the people of his time is also valid for us today. That "now" and "today" will remain immutable until the end of the world (Hebrews 3:13).

That means that the person who today hears, perhaps by chance, Christ's word: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; convert and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15), finds himself faced with the same choice as those who heard it 2000 years ago in a Galilean village: Either believe and enter the kingdom or refuse to believe and remain outside.

Unfortunately, the first option -- believing -- seems to be the last concern of many who read the Gospel and write books about it. Rather than submitting themselves to Christ's judgment, many judge him.

Today more than ever Jesus is on trial. It is a kind of "universal judgment" turned upside down. Scholars run this risk above all. The scholar must "dominate" the object of the science that he cultivates and remain neutral before it; but how is one supposed to "dominate" or remain neutral before an object when it is Jesus Christ? In this case one must let himself instead be dominated by, and not be the dominator of his object.

The kingdom of God was so important for Jesus that he taught us to pray every day for its coming. We turn to God saying, "Thy kingdom come," but God also turns to us and says through Jesus: "The kingdom of God is at hand, do not wait, enter!"

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