The Kingdom of God: From Scripture to Social Justice

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I. Introduction

As social beings and God's image bearers, we aspire to exist in a world where human rights and dignity are protected, and everyone is safeguarded from violence, oppression, and exploitation. However, disruptive actors and factors endanger our peace, well-being, and social order. Countries engage in warfare against one another, leading to far-reaching and devastating consequences, including loss of life, economic decline and poverty, displacement and migration. Greed can also lead to the normalization of the exploitation of people and nature. Resource inequality perpetuates a cycle of poverty.

In this presentation, I propose that the kingdom of God is a sign of hope and an invitation to heal our fractured world. In this kingdom, justice is a principal value emphasized by the Hebrew prophets, lived by Jesus, and taught by the Church. The presentation is divided into three parts. The first part examines the prophetic voice from the Hebrew prophetic literature that calls leaders to execute justice. The second part analyzes the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus's life and ministry, presenting it as a hopeful reality that counters the social disorder of his time. The third part explores the Church's social teaching, which aims to inspire discernment and action toward peace and justice.

II. The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

Before the United Monarchy was established after the Israelites entered the promised land, the twelve tribes were governed by God through judges and prophets. In times of war, each tribe would assist its neighbors in defending against hostile foreign armies. Under God's kingship, the people adhered to the Torah, rooted in the Ten Commandments, which was intended to promote an orderly society and foster relationships with God and with others. However, as threats from surrounding nations intensified, the Israelites requested a human king and, consequently, a centralized government to rival other nations (1 Sam 8:4-22). Despite God's warnings about heavy burdens and abuse of power by having an earthly king, the people remained steadfast and thus rejected God's direct kingship (1 Sam 10:18-19). God granted their heart's desire, leading to the establishment of the monarchy, beginning with Saul, followed by David and Solomon.

One expected characteristic of a good king is the enforcement of justice, which is not simply the proper execution of justice in court; instead, it concerns improving the conditions of the most marginalized and vulnerable members of society, including widows, resident aliens, and orphans.

It involves, as Walter Brueggemann defines it, ensuring that "all members of the community have access to resources and goods for the sake of a viable life of dignity."[1]

The Hebrew prophets consistently stressed the importance of justice. When kings and those in positions of power and privilege neglected their responsibility to safeguard the vulnerable and marginalized, the prophets called out their moral failures and abuses of power. Amos criticized

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 5-6.

the ruling elites and affluent landowners for disregarding the poor. He pointed out the perversion of justice, such as burdensome taxes imposed on the poor and unethical business practices, even resorting to selling poor people into slavery for small debts (8:4-6). Micah employed the vivid imagery of dismembering people like meat to make the point about brutal exploitation committed by leaders (3:1-3). We could sense Ezekiel's frustration and plea directed toward Israel's leaders, urging them to govern justly. He exclaimed, "Enough, you princes of Israel! Put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right!" (45:9).

Amid the injustices the poor and marginalized faced, the prophets delivered messages of judgment and hope. Amos, Isaiah, and Zephaniah used the theme of "the Day of the Lord" to convey impending judgment. Rather than being a day of salvation and restoration as the Israelites understood it, it would be a day of anguish and distress, darkness and destruction due to their injustice and idolatry.[2] For the prophets, however, hope for change remains. They urged people to pursue justice in every aspect of their lives, urging them to prioritize justice over superficial religious displays: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," proclaimed Amos (5:24). Micah called on people to do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with God (6:8). The prophets announced a new world order where God would lead the people through a Davidic king. Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied the coming of this king, who would establish peace, uphold justice, and promote righteousness in accordance with God's just nature (Isa 11:1-9; Jer 23:5; 33:15). Walter Houston notes that justice serves as "a standard by which a ruler is to be judged, and a mirror in which the ugliness of the sheer pursuit of self-interest can be revealed to the perpetrator."[3]

III. The Kingdom of God in the New Testament

The kingdom of God is central to Jesus's teaching and preaching. He refers to it as "at hand" (Matt 3:2) or "among you" (Luke 17:21). What is the kingdom of God exactly? Neither Jesus nor the Gospel writers provided a precise definition. Instead, Jesus uses parables to teach about the kingdom. The kingdom of God, according to him, is like the yeast that leavens bread (Matt 13:33), the mustard seed that grows into a large tree (Mark 4:30-31), and the treasure hidden in a field (Matt 13:44-46). To enter the kingdom of God, one must adopt a childlike spirit (Matt 18:1-4) and serve others (Matt 25:31-46).

The Gospels also do not explicitly identify Jesus as a king; however, he is referred to as the "son of David," a title commonly associated with a messianic king. In John, Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world (18:36). During Jesus's trial, Pilate asks Jesus whether he is the king of the Jews. He replies, "You say so" (Luke 23:3). Additionally, the inscription on the cross, which reads "Jesus, King of the Jews," indicates his perceived kingship (Luke 23:38).

This new Davidic king personifies and inaugurates God's reign through his incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection. The new order this Davidic king brings is characterized by God's plan

[2] Amos 5:18; Isa 13:6-9, 24:6, 29:17-24; Zeph 1:15-16, 3:8-20.
[3] Walter Houston, *Justice for the Poor?: Social Justice in the Old Testament in Concept and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 19.

for justice, liberation, and inclusion, wherein the underprivileged and disempowered have equal access to power and privilege.[4]

In Luke, Jesus's birth was first announced to the shepherds, who represented society's poor and lowly. They were the first worshippers of the newborn Savior and the first to proclaim the Good News to others (Luke 2:8-18). The Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise, announces that Jesus's birth and ministry will bring a radical reversal and dismantling of the existing social structures and powers: scattering the proud, humbling the powerful and privileged, exalting the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things (Luke 1:51-53). God's action reveals God's solidarity with those without worldly status and those on the periphery. It offers a pointed critique of the existing social structures that perpetuate inequality.

In Luke, Jesus's ministry focuses on preaching to the poor and marginalized. Jesus proclaims freedom for captives, sight for the blind, and liberty for the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isa 58:6; 61:1-2). By reaching out to the marginalized, he demonstrates God's inclusion and compassion and challenges the political and religious authorities of his time. The healing of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark is a notable example (5:1-20). The name of the possessed man or the unclean spirits is Legion, which to the original audience refers to a military unit of the Roman army. The Legion is allowed to enter a herd or "troop" of pigs, which rush down a steep bank into the sea and drown (5:13).[5] This drowning alludes to the drowning of Pharaohs and their troops in the Red Sea. Jesus's exorcisms and healings illustrate God's reign and supreme power over oppressive forces.

Jesus's death is an act of self-giving. It highlights God's solidarity with the victimized and enables the emergence of new life (cf. Phil 2:7). His crucifixion marks the end of a world immersed in death. Neither death nor the political and religious leaders who condoned his crucifixion can overpower him. While the cross denoted shame and brutal punishment in Roman culture, Jesus redefined it as the ultimate symbol of victory and hope for his followers. In discussing the connection between Jesus's crucifixion and the kingdom of God, Patrick Schreiner argues that the Gospels present the kingdom as realized through the cross. According to him, the cross establishes the kingdom; the kingdom comes through the cross.[6]

Jesus's death did not mark an end but rather the beginning of a new life. Walter Brueggemann notes that through Jesus's resurrection, he rekindles the potential for transformative hope. He writes: "The resurrection can only be received, affirmed, and celebrated as the new action of God, whose province is to create new futures for people and to let them be amazed in the midst of despair."[7] The resurrection expands Jesus's power and signifies the climax of his kingdom's inauguration.[8] It conveys hope in God. Such hope is not intended to distract from or diminish the

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[4] Bridgett A. Green, "Luke 18:1-30: Kingdom of God and Social Relations." PhD Dissertation. Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 2021, 2-3. Perrin, 162.
[5] Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 100-101.
[6] Patrick Schreiner, *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 99.
[7] Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 2nd ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 112.
[8] Schreiner, *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross,* 94, 106.

anguish of present injustices, as noted by David Gushee and Codi Norred.[9] Rather, it is a future-focused hope that encourages us to reject current inequities,

Through these salvific events, God announces that an alternative sociopolitical and economic order will replace the existing self-serving social order.

IV. The Kingdom of God and the Social Teaching of the Church [Slide 4]

In preaching the kingdom of God, Jesus encouraged his listeners to actively engage in the mission of transformation. The Church has responded to Jesus's invitation to engage with the world as a sign of God's reign and hope. In both its holiness and fragility, the Church has played a role in reflective, constructive, and prophetic engagement with the world. Its mission is to form consciences in souls and societies in order to promote faithful citizenship. The Church guides us to the power of reason in determining a just social order and addressing contemporary social issues. Its social teaching is rooted in the messages of the prophets and of Jesus. It emphasizes God's concern for justice and the poor.

In his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII, for example, attempted to address the challenges that factory workers faced during the Industrial Revolution. He criticized liberal capitalism for exploiting labor and argued that work should not be treated as a commodity, as it undermines human dignity. He advocated for equal rights, fair wages, safe working conditions, and the right to form unions. He emphasized the importance of private property as a natural right for individual freedom and well-being. He also asserted that the state should protect workers from exploitation and ensure equitable distribution of wealth.

Papal encyclicals and social documents can sometimes be considered as too general or inadequate. In *Rerum Novarum*, for example, the pope sought to address social issues, but did not address one aspect: the agency of the workers. He believed social change should come "from the top down," with those benefiting from liberal capitalism leading efforts to address social inequalities and create a more equitable society. What happens if they resist the call for social structural change? The pope discouraged confrontation or revolution. In doing so, he indirectly expected the oppressed to endure oppression and injustice "in the hope of a reward in the next life."[10] This approach is termed "escapist theology," as it tends to deflect the confrontation of current injustices.

As others have noted, papal social encyclicals and the Church's official social documents are not how-to guides, absolute principles, or blueprints for social order. Instead, they are an invaluable resource. They provide individuals and Christian communities with theological and moral guidance and vision derived from Scripture and Tradition. They have been developed over centuries for Christians and all people of goodwill to reflect, judge, and act to develop an integral and flourishing human society.

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[9] David P. Gushee and Codi D. Norred, "The Kingdom of God, Hope and Christian Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2018): 12.
[10] Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth: Catholic Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 45.

Inspired by Scriptures and influenced by the Church's social teachings, as well as by the Spirit's prompting, individuals and religious organizations have committed themselves to what liberation theologians have called "a preferential option for the poor" to address the root causes of poverty and inequality through service and advocacy. For example, Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Worker Movement to implement the Catholic social teaching of nonviolence against injustice and hospitality for those in need. César Chávez co-founded the United Farm Workers union to promote the welfare of Mexican American farm workers. The Vincentians founded this university to empower children of Catholic immigrants to be agents of change for themselves and society. And the Vincentians' social justice heritage continues to be the foundation of the university's mission. Prophetic-minded Christians have condemned war, racial injustice, and inequality. The Jesuit Daniel Berrigan vehemently opposed war and advocated for racial equality and poverty reduction, though some considered him a Christian anarchist. Oscar Romero spoke out against government corruption and violence and championed the rights of the poor and marginalized.

Catholic Social Teaching has inspired various movements, including the Worker-Priest movement in France and the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America. The Worker-Priest movement emerged after World War II, as priests lived in voluntary poverty to express solidarity with the working class. They left their rectories to work alongside factory workers to experience the workers' social realities of daily existence. Their firsthand experiences of social and economic inequalities led them to be involved in social and political activism. They fought for improved housing, fair wages, and enhanced working conditions.

In the Medellin Conference Documents promulgated in 1968, the Latin American bishops committed themselves to a church for the poor. They denounced unjust social structures and embraced justice and liberation through the concept of the "preferential option for the poor." They embraced the process of "conscientization" or consciousness-raising, which encouraged the poor to critically reflect on their oppressive conditions and the root causes of their struggles. The aim was to empower people to become their own agents in confronting unjust systems and pursuing liberation.[11]

V. Conclusion

As illustrated, the Old and New Testaments and the Catholic Social Teaching prioritize justice and caring for the poor. The prophetic voice offers hope for the kingdom of God, responding to social disintegration under worldly leaders. Jesus embodies these values through his life and ministry. He preached an upside-down kingdom where the marginalized are blessed and invited listeners to actively transform unjust systems through his teachings on peace, justice, and community. The Catholic Church, through its social teaching, offers theological and moral guidance for believers to work on changing systemic structures that perpetuate injustice.

God has given us Scripture, and the Church has provided us with its social teaching as tools to build the kingdom of God. Our mission, individually and collectively, is drawn from our faith in Jesus Christ to mend fractures in the world. We are called to become tangible signs of hope by dismantling anything that separates us from one another and upholding dignity for ourselves and

[11] Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth,* 200.

our neighbors. Our care for one another, especially vulnerable and marginalized members of society, must begin with the deep conviction that we are created as beings meant for communion with God and with others. St. Paul uses the analogy of the body in First Corinthians to describe our mutual dependence. For him, every part of the body is needed for the body to function well for the common good (1 Cor 12:4). In the words of St. Paul from First Corinthians, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:26).