

THE JEWISH WORLD AT THE TIME OF JESUS

At the birth of Jesus, Herod I the Great, an ally of the Roman emperor, reigned in Palestine. At his death in 4 BC, the kingdom was divided among his sons, with the consent of the emperor.

Judea, the Southern province containing Jerusalem and Samaria in the centre, fell to Archelaus. Galilee in the North and Transjordan to the east, were governed by Herod Antipas II who reigned until the year 39. Another son, Philip, inherited the territory to the east of the Jordan and from the Lake of Galilee to the north.

Because of his cruelty, Archelaus was deposed by the Romans and exiled; in his place Rome named a governor in 6 AD. Among several, the best known is Pontius Pilate, who held the office between the years 26 and 36 and condemned Jesus to death.

The Roman government left the Jews a certain freedom of movement. Herod in the North enjoyed relative independence and Roman officials did not usually interfere in internal Jewish concerns in the South, although there were fairly frequent exceptions.

Government and Jewish Parties

The Jewish government was in the hands of a Great Council composed of seventy-two members, under the presidency of the supreme high priest. This Council was made up of three groups: the high priests, the lay senators (or elders), the scribes, scholars or lawyers, who were experts on religious questions and the Jewish Law.

High Priests were those members of the sacerdotal aristocracy belonging to certain powerful families, who occupied the highest offices in the administration of the temple. The high priest was a sacred figure. Originally his office was for life, but at the time of Jesus the Romans named and deposed the high priests according to their political leanings.

The high priests were the official representatives of religion and worship, who had charge of the temple, the religious and political centre of Israel. All Jews over twelve years of age, including those who lived abroad (and they were many) had to pay an annual temple

tax equivalent to two days work (Mt 17:24). For the maintenance of the clergy they also had to pay ten per cent (tithes) of the harvest (Mt 23:23). Besides this, the temple received gifts (Mk 7:11) and abundant alms, above all from the rich (Mk 12:41), not to mention the livestock market for the sacrifices and the currency exchange (Mk 11:15). All this turned the temple into a great commercial racket administered by the high priests. They represented the political and religious power, and were at the same time an important financial group to be reckoned with.

The city of Jerusalem was practically supported by the large temple revenues especially at seasons of pilgrimage -- three times a year -- when besides the Palestinians, came Jews from the diaspora and foreigners as well (Jn 12:30).

The second group in the Council was made up of Senators (elders) who were laymen chosen from among the aristocratic families. For the most part they were great landowners and were the backbone of the Sadducee Party, to which the high priests also belonged.

This party was very conservative in matters religious (they only accepted as Sacred Scripture the first five books of the Bible, attributed to Moses) and also in politics. They adapted themselves to Roman domination and had reached a kind of compromise, an unwritten concordat; they maintained order because they held the leading positions, so that the Romans left them alone. They had renounced any ideal beyond that of maintaining the status quo, in which they enjoyed a certain leeway and could see to the religious and political administration of the country. They were realists: they accepted the injustice of foreign domination as long as it did not compromise their position.

The third group in the Council was made up of the scholars (scribes or lawyers who were experts in theology and canon law) the majority of whom belonged to the Pharisaic Party. These "separates ones" were made up mostly of devout laymen who aimed at observing religious practices down to the utmost detail. They were dedicated to the study of the Old Testament so as to be sure what they had to do; but, besides this, they had gradually elaborated an immense commentary that explained the meaning of the ancient precepts and observances and determined exactly what had to be done in every particular circumstance. The individual had to be constantly attentive to observe some commandment or other. The scholarly Pharisees considered themselves the authentic magisterium of the law and attributed divine authority to their tradition, for according to them, tradition added nothing to the ancient scriptures, it only explained them.

Their two main preoccupations were, first, to pay the ten percent of the fruits of the earth and to consume nothing without being sure that this had been paid; second to keep themselves "pure" avoiding contact with dead objects or persons with certain sicknesses (like leprosy), and having nothing to do with dubious characters -- which meant in practice, anyone who did not observe the religious law in the way they explained it. They

thought that to touch such things or deal with such people would put them on bad terms with God. For them, to sin was to transgress certain rules or norms that they took to be binding. [\(1\)](#)

The Pharisees had immense authority over the people. Although they were looked on with great aversion because of their pride (Lk 16:15), the people let themselves be impressed by the virtuous appearance holy ones they contrived to maintain to bolster up their prestige and influence (Mt 6:1--2, 5:16). The Pharisees had managed to make people believe that to be pleasing to God they had to imitate them. The guilt complex thus created in the people made them docile subjects, and in this way easily dominated by the Pharisees. In spite of all their observance of religious rules, the Pharisees loved money and exploited the simple folk under pretext of piety (Mt 23:25-28; Mk 12,40; Lk 11:39; 16,14). [\(2\)](#)

Their fidelity to the law led the Pharisees to despise others (Lk 18:9), those they called "sinners," that is, "unbelievers" or "men without religion" (Mt 9:10-11, Lk 15:1-2) or "accursed" (Jn 7:49). For them, the religious law had to be carried out to the letter, but at the same time there were plenty of loopholes, that allowed for injustice. Besides, excessive carefulness in small matters concealed a glossing over of the really important things (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42). Among the Pharisees there were always some sincere men who were on their guard against the dangers of hypocrisy, but they had scanty following.

Pharisaic influence was so great, that the party of the Sadducees (high priests and leaders), although nominally in possession of political and religious power, never took a decision without making sure they were supported by the scholarly Pharisees.

In short, the Council stood for power, the ruling class under every aspect; political, ideological, economical and religious.

The Essenes

One sect that broke with the political and religious system was that of the Essenes who carried the pharisaic trend to its extreme consequences. The Pharisees were the opposition party to the Sadducees, but they respected institutions, whereas the Essenes, being far more radical, held that worship and the temple were impure because the priests were illegitimate, and they took no part in the ceremonies nor did they collaborate with the establishment. They hoped God would restore the priesthood and the temple. Such was their intransigence that they considered themselves the unique people of God, and they hoped for divine judgement that would save them and condemn everyone else.

They lived a community life even in the cities. On the banks of the Dead Sea the ruins of a kind of Essene convent have been found. They possessed no private property but renounced their goods in favour of the community. The community saw to all the needs of its members. It had its own special rituals, as washing and ritual baths, and a common

meal as a sign of brotherhood. It was usual for an Essene not to marry for fear of the purificatory rules of the religious law. They were extremely rigid in observance and their principle was to love the members of the community and to hate outsiders (cf. Mt 5:43).

The Nationalists

The last important movement consisted of the fanatical Nationalists ("zealots"), who were clandestine resistance groups. It seems their founder was Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), who opposed the paying of tribute to the Roman emperor. He organized a rebellion that was put down by the Romans in a bath of blood. His last hideout was in the city of Sephoris, on the hill facing Nazareth. Jesus was still a child when the Roman troops destroyed this city he could see from his hometown.

Among these zealots was a group of terrorists armed with daggers, who went round assassinating their enemies, that is, those who collaborated with the Roman government.

The Nationalists were recruited from among the oppressed classes. Their opposition to the census and the tribute gained them the sympathy of the peasants, and small proprietors whereas the landowners went along with the Roman regime. The Nationalists had a land reform programme and at the beginning of the Judean war (65 BC) they destroyed the registers of debts to liberate the poor from the clutches of the rich. They accepted the Jewish institutions but loathed those who held positions of authority, considering them traitors because they collaborated with foreign power. This party had its stronghold in Galilee and the Romans persecuted it to death (Lk. 13:1). [\(3\)](#)

The Hope: The Kingdom Of God

The great hope of Israel centred in the kingdom of God which would change the course of history by inaugurating the period of justice, peace and prosperity announced by the prophets, the more strenuously since the bitter experience of the deportation to Babylon.

It is difficult to summarize the varied ways the Jews conceived of the hoped-for liberation. Their position could be approximately summed up as follows: God's reign was to be inaugurated by the Messiah, the Leader consecrated by God king of Israel, restorer of David's Kingdom, the victorious warrior who would cast off Roman domination and defeat and humiliate the pagan nations. He was to be the guardian and master of the law (Jn 4:25), a judge to purify the people and inaugurate the period when there would be no more poor nor oppressed people and all the institutions -- king, temple, priesthood, and law courts -- would function smoothly. Sin, hunger and misfortune would be done away with, and they would live in a truly happy society. For many of the Jews the Messiah was to appear on the parapet of the Temple (Mt 4:5; Lk 4:9) from whence he would make a proclamation to the people and initiate his victorious reign.,

Attitudes Toward This Hope

Each party took up its own attitude toward the hoped-for reign of God. The Sadducees (leading class, political, religious and economic power) had renounced the idea, preferring to get along with the political situation of the moment.

The Pharisees (leading class, spiritual power), moderately integrist who made no secret of their hatred of the Romans, were dedicated to the practice of religion, thinking thus to accelerate the coming of God's reign. But they did nothing to improve the unjust social situation in which they enjoyed a privileged position and for which they themselves were also responsible. They fancied that if they were faithful to the religious law, God would intervene in his good time with a kind of coup d'etat, without human collaboration. They cursed those who neither thought nor acted as they did, especially the uneducated simple folk who had no time for such a complicated kind of piety, and they blamed the delay in the coming of the kingdom on the peasants' lack of religion.

The Essenes, the extreme intransigent group, like the Pharisees were expecting God's reign, and were oblivious of everything outside their own elect circle.

The nationalist Zealots who belonged to the oppressed classes, hoped for the reign of God but they did not cross their arms like the Pharisees. They were activists, and went in for direct action aimed at violent revolution -- whose first objective would be to liberate Israel from Roman domination. The revolution was to be both social, to improve the lot of the poor, and political in that it aimed at eliminating unworthy leaders. The party professed radical reformism.

The ruling classes were, therefore, either collaborationists (Sadducees) or inactive spiritualizers (Pharisees) who, while hating the Roman domination, did not present any serious danger to the status quo. The people, who were despised and abandoned by the leaders, lived aimless and drifting lives (Mt 9:36 "like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless"). They sympathized with the nationalist party and, because they had lost all hope of justice from the ruling classes, were easily drawn to violence.

All the parties had a common denominator: the belief in the validity of the institutions and the privileges of Israel; although all, except naturally, the Sadducees held that they were administered by unworthy men.⁽⁴⁾

The Poor

The Palestinian economic structure consisted almost entirely of two social classes, the poor, the majority of whom were peasants and the landowners or well-to-do class. There was no middle class worth mentioning and even the artisans belonged to the lower class. Given the distance between the two and the lack of a middle class, there was no hope of human promotion for the poor, and they had no means of bettering their situation which

depended wholly on the will of the men in power. [\(5\)](#)

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS: THE NEW HUMAN COMMUNITY

We now come to what the evangelists tell us about the message Jesus brought into this confused and tense situation. John the Baptist, a most austere man, appeared to exhort the people to change their life, saying that the reign of God, hope of the Jewish people, was at the doors (Mt 3:2).

From Galilee came Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth (Mk 6:3), and John baptized him. In this way Jesus stood with guilty humanity, committing himself to carry out his mission in favour of all (cf. 2Cor 5:21). From then on Jesus was invested as Messiah, the leader sent by God. The Spirit, who is the strength of God, came upon him and the voice of the Father declared him to be his Son, King and Servant.

For Israel, to be a king meant salvation; to be a servant, salvation for all nations (Is 42:1-4, 6; cf. Mt 12). King signified triumph, Servant, suffering (Is. 53:3-12). These features, scattered in the Old Testament and now united in the person of Jesus, make it clear that in God's plan, the idea of the Messiah was not the same as the one the Jews expected. But his mission, which was to be King and Servant in one, was to implant justice and to defend the poor and the exploited (Ps 71: 1-4, 12-14; Is 42:1-4; 49:9-13).

Jesus passed the test (the temptation in the wilderness) which authenticated his mission as Messiah and Servant, casting aside any pretensions to political power and glory in this world (Mt 4:9-10; Lk 4:5-8). It was clear from the beginning that the reign of God was not going to be established through violence or war and the Messiah was not going to be a triumphant general or a nationalist leader. Moreover, to make use of power and glory (honour, prestige, money) to advance the kingdom of God was contrary to what God wants, making one the tool of Satan.

The Proclamation: The Reign of God

After his baptism and divine commission, Jesus returned to Galilee, where he began his active life. Like John the Baptist, he demanded a change of life, because the reign of God was at hand (Mt 4:17). However he was not trying to say the same as John. For the latter, the reign would begin with a tremendous judgement (Mt 3:12); for Jesus it is new change God was offering humankind.

Naturally the people understood this kingdom according to their own ideas that is, their expectation of a change in the history of Israel that would bring about the final era of prosperity and triumph under the government of the Messiah-King. When Jesus said the kingdom was at hand, the people began to expect the coup d'etat in which the Messiah

would fight and overcome the Romans, putting an end to foreign domination, and reforming the national institutions.

But Jesus distinguished two eras in God's reign: one historical, that must come about now, and one final, in which God's triumph will be complete. He has come to start the first era and will set a movement going that will be the beginning of God's reign in the world.

The coming of the kingdom was good news (Mk 1:15), especially for the poor and oppressed, as had been announced in the Old Testament (Lk 4:18-19; Mt 11:5). The good news was that they are going to be made free and would no longer be in need. This was God's message brought by Jesus: an era of equality, abundance (Lk 2:51-53) and peoplehood, of which the only king would be God himself. As they had hoped, it was a change in the course of history -- in the form of a new human society.

The Group

To carry out his purpose, as soon as he had made his proclamation Jesus gathered together a group of men, humble folk, fishermen from the Lake of Galilee (Mt 4:18-22). He did not call them to live for themselves nor to dedicate themselves to the practice of virtue separated from the world, but for a mission for which he was going to prepare them: to be "fishers of men." That is, Jesus did not form a closed group but an open one that had to grow, drawing men and women to the new style of life that he was going to teach his first disciples (Mt. 13:31-32).

Comparison with the Existing Parties

Jesus identified himself with none of the existing trends or parties. Certainly not with the ruling class: neither with the Sadducee collaborationists, who had practically renounced the ideal of the reign of God, nor with the Pharisees, who dominated and exploited the people with their piety and kept them in a state of false religiosity. On the one hand they upheld injustice while they declared on the other that God would find a solution to it. They were the partisans of inactivity who perpetuated the unjust situation.

The Nationalist party was the active one, demanding reforms. Like them, Jesus wanted the reign of God to begin there and then. Similarly, his followers belonged to the oppressed classes. But his position and tactics were totally different.

The deep cleavage between Jesus and all these parties is this: all of them accepted the Jewish system; they believed the monarchy, the temple, and the priesthood were valid and permanent institutions, besides which they upheld the privileged position of the Jewish people among the nations. But Jesus believed in none of these things.

Jesus Holds A Radical Position

The position held by Jesus was radical: he denied the validity of the system. Solutions to

the problem of injustice would not be found by inactivity, or through reformation (whether gradual or violent) of existing institutions. The root of the troubles of humanity lie in the very foundations of the institutions it has created: in the striving for money, desire for prestige and thirst for power; in the three-fold ambition for "holding," "climbing," "commanding," that spurs people on to rivalry, hatred and violence.

Hence Jesus rejected all the Israelite institutions: temple, monarchy and priesthood. He proposed to create a new society, in which people could be free and happy (Mt 5:3-10). To attain this people had to voluntarily renounce the three false values: money (thirst for riches), glory (ambition for recognition), power (desire to dominate). Instead of hoarding, sharing; instead of ambition, equality; instead of domination, solidarity and humble, voluntary service. Where there was rivalry, hatred and violence, there should be fraternity, love and life.

The radicalism of Jesus makes us understand why in the gospel we do not find the plea for justice as commonly as in the prophets. The prophets were reformers too, and they demanded justice because they believed in the validity of the institutions. Jesus did not come to ask for justice, but to offer a final solution to the injustice of the world.

But all this is no more than a beautiful idea and a utopia. However, Jesus did not propose an ideology, and for this reason he did not preach his message to everyone. To the people he spoke in parables, to start them thinking. What he wanted was to form a group where this ideal would be lived. As long as there are no such communities, there can be no salvation, the aim Jesus proposed will be nullified and his doctrine and example become just one more ideology.

Certainly, violence is no way to shape these communities. If it is essential to the group that persons should be free they have to join it through personal conviction.

Proclamation of the Messiah

On that account Jesus never forced but only invited and started his proclamation by saying: "Happy are those who choose to be poor, for their King is God" (Mt. 5:3). To belong to this kingdom of God, which is the name he gives to this new society, it is not enough to be poor; we have to renounce henceforth all desire of riches, of ambition that imprisons humanity's heart, leads people to injustice and separates them from God (Mt 6:19-21,24).

Every section of the proclamation starts with the word "happy." That is, those who choose to be poor are not going to be among the oppressed. God, who is their king, is going to liberate them. They will be free persons in the kingdom of mutual love, free from need, for all striving for justice will be more than satisfied within the group itself, where each one supports the other and everyone is fully supported by God. In these sincere hearts, where no rivalry exists, God will make himself present. Those who

experience the fraternity will be those who work for peace among all people, and this labour for reconciliation will make them so like God that he will call them his children (his very own sons and daughters). They must expect that the perverse human society will persecute those who do not accept its values. This is no sign of failure, but rather an indication they are on God's side and are treading the right path.

As Jesus explained to the first disciples, the group was not to live for itself, but in order to draw all people of good will (they are the light of the world, visible city, Mt 5: 14-16). It was to become a factor for change in human society (they are the salt of the earth, Mt 5:13; and leaven, 13:33), because the purpose of the coming of the Messiah is not to lead a few people to individual perfection, but it is God's intervention to change the course of history.

Conditions For Discipleship

It goes without saying that the indispensable condition for discipleship was, faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (Mk 1,1; Mt 16:16; Jn 20:31); faith that meant adhering to him, commitment to his person and mission. It is obvious that there would be not motive in following Jesus unless one were convinced he was sent by God.

a) Renunciation of Riches

Granted this faith, the first condition Jesus imposed on his disciple is renunciation of riches (Mt 5,3; Mk 10,21 and Lk 12:33; 14:33), the only way of breaking with the unjust system (Lk 16:9). This renunciation is not an ascetical counsel for a few isolated individuals, but a necessity for those who wish to belong to the new human community that God wants to create in this world.

Not that Jesus demanded the renunciation of one's possessions as a condition for salvation.⁶ But the goal of the group Jesus was forming is not just to obtain eternal life, which is sure already (Mk 10:30; Jn 3:18; 6:47,54; Eph 2:5-6), but to transform human society. And to do so, individual goodness is not enough, nor is good done from on high, or paternalistic charitable works and alms. He wants the creation of a group in which there is neither mine nor yours, where everyone shares all he has with the others (Acts 2:42-45; 4:52).

Nevertheless, those who choose to be poor must not be taken to be a group of beggars. On the contrary, Jesus promised to put an end to need and hunger. What he says is that the solution to the problem is not in hoarding (Mt 6:19-21), but in sharing (Mt 14:15-21). The person who gives up trying to be rich here on earth has God himself for his riches and security (Mt 6:19-21; 19:21). Those who share what they have will find abundance, which is clearly what Jesus meant when he multiplied the loaves (Mk 6:38-44) and answered Peter's challenge (Mk 10:28-31).⁷

Such a life contradicts that of society, and for this reason Jesus asked those who wanted to be his disciples for a self-margination to create a new lifestyle. It is not enough, then, to be actually poor to belong to Jesus' group, but there must be another step, namely, to renounce the desire of riches and embrace the fellowship.

Jesus, then, did not simply identify himself with the poor and oppressed, nor did he become a leader of the masses (Mk 1:37, 38, 45; 6:45; 8:10; Jn 6:15). He had the deepest love for the poor, he was always ready for them, taught them, healed and fed them, and gave unstintingly of his time, but when he had finished helping, he withdrew. He neither wanted to be one more of the oppressed nor their leader; what he was after was to open up a new possibility that would allow the oppressed to escape from their oppression and the hungry from their hunger. There was never a needy person in the group of Jesus (Lk 22:35); he did not go in for privations (Mt 11:18-19) nor did he impose fasting on his disciples (Mt 9:14-15); and hunger for him was sufficient reason to disregard the law (Mt 12:1-8). He lived poorly because he did not believe in the value of riches and he knew well that riches imply injustice (Lk. 16:9) since human liberty and happiness are only possible when ambition is eliminated.

b) Renunciation of Honour and Power

Renunciation of riches brings with it renunciation of the honours and power which stem from them. Where there are no rich nor poor, there is no top dog nor under dog. In his group, Jesus would allow no lording it over each other. Firstly, there was total liberty in the group; he never imposed a rule to be kept, a holy day to observe or an obligatory practice. And when he was criticized because his disciples were not leading an austere life, he absolutely refused to set up a rule about fasting (Mt. 9:14; 17). Liberty and joy were the hallmark of the group of Jesus and he himself compared it to a wedding celebration.

Secondly, he would have no special titles or signs of honour given to his followers as was customary for the rabbis. He forbade them to call anyone "father," because all are brothers and sisters with one Father in heaven. Neither would he let them call anyone "rabbi" (My Lord, Monsignor), as was usual for teachers, because they had only one teacher, Jesus himself (Mt 23:8;11).

Every time the disciples showed signs of ambition for power, he nipped it in the bud; they were to keep on the level of youngsters (Mt 18:1-4). And if someone held an office in the group, this could never resemble civilian government where each dominates the other (Mt 20:25-27). To power he opposed equality (Mt 23:8) and mutual service (Mt 20:25-28), and he had threatening words for anyone who tried to climb (Mt 23:12).

To be his disciple one had to uproot self-interest: "If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine he must leave self behind" (Mt. 16:24), that is, give up looking for personal advantages. And besides this, he sketched a background which goes clean contrary to the

desire for fame: "Take up his cross" that is, be ready to be looked down upon, excluded and even condemned by the society one lives in (Mt 6:10-12; 16:24).

c) Decision

To adhere to Jesus and to proclaim the good news has to come before family ties (Mt 10:37; Lk 14:26), love of fame and life and security and worldly success (Mt 16:25-26). The decision must be radical and irrevocable: "No one who sets his hand to the plough and then keeps looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9:62).

"The World" in Saint John

The same rejection of the false values of society is expressed in John by the opposition between Jesus and "the world." That, in a pejorative sense means the social religious and political system of his time. The sin of the Jewish leaders was that they belonged to a power system that was necessarily based on lies and violence (Jn 8:23,44).

Against these leaders, Jesus asserted himself to be the ideal shepherd, not come to destroy and kill, but to give life and to give his own life for his own (Jn 10:10-11). Leaders who failed to do this were nothing but thieves and bandits (Jn 10:1-2,7).⁽⁸⁾

Jesus and the People: Liberation

The great hindrance to accepting the message of Jesus was respect for the Jewish leaders and institutions. Jesus liberated people in two ways: by word and deed.⁽⁹⁾ By his words, he attacked the leaders' prestige, not as individuals (he never gives proper names) but as a class. The Pharisees enjoyed the veneration of the people because of their renown for holiness and the people felt guilty if they did not carry out religious obligations with the same meticulous perfection as they did. Jesus launched a frontal attack: those they take for saints are nothing but hypocrites (Mt 6:2,5,16). He calls them thieves to their face (Mt 23:25; Lk 11:39). In this way he destroys their influence and puts an end to the false idea that holiness consists in fulfilling many observances and devotional practices (Mt 5:20).

But Jesus does not simply prove it in theory; he sets the disciples and the people to open their eyes to the facts as they are and to interpret them; that is, he awakens their critical spirit (Mt 6:2,5,16; 15:14; 16:12; 23:5-7). Faced with the scholars or masters he declares that their way of interpreting and teaching the religious law is insufficient and false and the people should not trust their doctrine, because they are not teaching what God said but only their own elaboration of it (Mt 15: 3-9; 22:41-45; 23:16-22).

The high priests, representatives of the official ideology and administrators of religion and the temple, he called bandits (Mt 21:13) and announced that God had taken away all their authority (Mk 12:9). The temple, which was the centre of religion and the pride of

the Jewish nation, he called a den of thieves, sterile and accursed (Mk. 11:12-21: the fig-tree, figure of the temple), and unimpressed by its grandeur, he announced its total destruction (Mk 13:1-2).

But Jesus does more than talk. He shows by his actions the falsehood of the ideas propagated by the leaders. He does things forbidden by law and disregards what the scholars say is obligatory. For example: in the Old Testament it says (Lv 13:45) that to touch a leper is to become impure. Jesus touches one and the contrary happens: it is not Jesus who becomes impure but the leper who is cleansed (Mk 1:40-42). According to the lawyers, to deal with unbelievers renders one impure. Jesus not only did this, but he shared meals with notorious sinners (Mk 2:13-17). The Lawyers said it was wrong to pluck and crush ears of corn on the Sabbath; Jesus told the people that the person is more important than the Sabbath obligation (Mk 2:23-28). They said that before eating one had to wash hands according to certain rites in case one had touched anything "impure," and neither Jesus nor his disciples did so (Mk 7:1-2; Lk 11:37-38).

It was forbidden to enter a pagan's house and Jesus offered to go to the home of the captain whose servant was sick (Mt 8:5-8). It was not considered the right thing for men to travel with women, and Jesus went all over Galilee with the twelve and a number of women who helped to support them (Lk 8:1-3). The lawyers taught that to obtain God's pardon you had to offer sacrifices in the temple or do works of mercy, and Jesus forgave sinners simply because they had faith (Mk 2:1-5). It was inconceivable that a respectable man should allow a prostitute to touch him, and Jesus let the repenting woman pour out perfume and kiss his feet (Lk 7:36-39).

Actually, apart from faith in God, Jesus left nothing of the existing Jewish religious code standing except justice and good-heartedness to one's fellows (Mt 7:12; 19:16-19; 22:34-40; 23:23; 54:34-36). All other obligations: sacrifices in the temple (Mk 12:32-34), prayers at fixed hours (Lk 5:33-34), ritual washings (Mk 7:3), distinctions between permitted or forbidden foods (Mk 7:19) and consequently, discrimination between religious (observant) and non-religious people (non-observant), had no value for him. He affirmed that the so-called "sinners" were nearer God than those who were held to be unspotted (Lk 18:9-14); that is, he declared invalid what was properly speaking religious practice. What God values is that we be good to others (Lk 10:30-37) and the only thing that stains a person is evil intentions, and harming one's neighbour (Mk 7:20-23).⁽¹⁰⁾

Jesus asked much more: it is not enough to kill, despising is already killing (Mt 6:21-22). To avoid false oaths is insufficient, one has to be utterly sincere (Mt 5:33-37). Going beyond loving those who love you, you have to love and do good to those who do not love you (Mt 5:43-45). What Jesus wants is true and sincere good-heartedness towards everyone revealed in every detail of daily life (Mt 7:12).

Jesus cares for those who seek him.⁽¹¹⁾ He accepts invitations from the rich as well, but without concealing his message (Lk. 11:37-52; 14:1-14).

Jesus and the Disciples: The Revelation of the Messiah

Jesus has such respect for the freedom of his disciples that he did not at first reveal he was the Messiah; they had to be able to recognize him from the way he lived and acted. ⁽¹²⁾ He led his disciples on to reflect and when they have been with him long enough he raises the decisive question: "Who do you think I am?" Peter, in the name of all of them said he was the promised Messiah, the son of God (Mt 16:16).

This is the faith Jesus wanted them to rise to, and from then on his objective was to go up to the capital city, Jerusalem, to denounce the system and foretell his end. But just then a difficulty arose: the twelve recognized him as Messiah but their old ideas still clung to them. They interpreted this title as the Nationalists did, hoping he would triumph in Jerusalem and begin his reign.

Jesus wanted to rid them of this idea. From the outset explained that he was not going to be acclaimed but, rejected and killed by the national leaders. This provokes Peter's protest and Jesus hurls at him the worst insult he can (Mt 16:21-23). All along the road to Jerusalem the disciples, hoping for personal gain, follow without understanding (Mk 9:30-32). Jesus repeats up to three times what is going to happen to him (Mk 10:32-34), but they fail to grasp it. As can be seen from James and John, they still hope the reign of God will satisfy their ambitions (Mk 10:37). They love Jesus, but nationalism and ambition block their understanding.

When they reach Jerusalem a nationalistic demonstration is organized acclaiming Jesus as King David's successor (Mk 11:10), restorer of the monarchy and the glory of the nation. But to frustrate such pretensions, Jesus enters the city riding an ass's colt which was the poor man's horse not meant for kings.

Jesus was patient with his disciples; he taught them, scolded them, answered their questions. Although he saw they didn't understand, he did not abandon them and always insisted that not everything would end with his death (Mt 8:31; 9:31; 10:34). The twelve are an example of the difficulty felt by oppressed peoples as a social class or national community, to renounce revenge (Acts 1:6). Their fixed idea was the turn of the tide that will put them on top. This had already happened to Jesus in Nazareth. When he suppressed the final verse of Isaiah that spoke of retaliation, all the people rose up against him. When he said that Israel would have no privilege as a nation they wanted to kill him (Lk. 4:16-30).

Jesus and the Authorities: The Denunciation

Then Jesus came face to face with the central authorities⁽¹³⁾ in Jerusalem, where he denounced the establishment. He knew it was to cost him his life. It was the final battle, a fight to the death.

He cursed the fig tree which was a symbol of the temple where money had taken God's place (Mk 11:12-21). He would not recognize any high priestly authority (11:27-33) and told the priests that God had dismissed them (12:9) and Israel has ceased to be the people of God (Mt 21:43). He declared that the God of the temple authorities was not the true one because he was a God of the dead that did not exist (Mk 12:28-27). He insulted the High Priests telling them that tax-gatherers and prostitutes were nearer than they to the kingdom of God (Mt 21:28-32). Once more he reduced the Old Law to a commitment to God and humanity, leaving aside its religious aspects (Mk 12:28-34). He denied what the scholars taught about the Messiah coming to restore the kingdom of Israel and the monarchy of David (Mk 12:35-37) and broke into a violent denunciation of the religious leaders, insulting them in the presence of the people (Mt 23: 1-36). But Jesus was not insensitive and did not hide his sorrow for the ruin to come through the obstinacy of the leaders (Mt 23:37-39).

When the battle was over, Jesus left the temple never to return. He announced the destruction of temple and city to his disciples, assuring them at the same time of the success of the work he has begun (Mk 13).⁽¹⁴⁾

The Supper

It was at his last supper that Jesus gave his last teaching. He now enlarged on what he had begun at the multiplication of the loaves when he promised the divine blessing and abundance to the poor who share all they have. Bread must be shared -- but with bread they were to give everything, even life itself. The sharing of bread is the expression of limitless love.

This is what Jesus did. Having given them everything he was going to give his life for them and for all humanity. The same thing must come about in the groups of disciples. This bread, figure and means of love for one another, is Jesus himself, and in a community of this kind he is present. Eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus together is the creation of the new peoplehood of God.

His final word was, then, that they should live and die as he had lived and would die (this is my body -- this is my blood), that they follow him to death -- creating the new society of disciples and standing up against the evil in the world as he has done. Since this is beyond human strength, he gives them his own life. The eucharist in which Jesus gave himself to his disciples demanded, therefore, a commitment to live in this fellowship and to stand up against the world that will kill Jesus.

At the same time Jesus heartened them. His death was not the end of everything; the trial would pass away and success was sure; he announced his resurrection (Mk 14:27-31).

The Cross

At the moment of truth, Jesus felt horror and anguish (Mk 12:33). Did he have to die like a criminal to destroy the evils of human society and save humanity? For one moment he begged the Father to find another solution, but he soon understood that a fight to the death is shown by dying; if not, it would be just talk, no one would believe. He accepted the Father's plan fully. He had to show the evil of the world of money and power, that kill Jesus and men. Jesus would not yield even at the cost of life itself.

Keeping to his path, he offered no resistance nor did he allow it (Mt 26: 50-52; cf. Mt 5,5); he does not want to give any pretext for the violence of power to dissimulate justice. Before the Jewish tribunal there was no faltering. He declared he was the Messiah, that God is with him and against them, that he would triumph and that ruin was awaiting them and all they represented (Mk 14:61-62).

The religious authorities spit on him and gave him blows (Mt 26:67-68). The Roman soldiers, representatives of repression and violence, made him a bleeding mockery (Mt 27:27-31). Letting themselves be manipulated by the leaders, the people clamoured for his crucifixion (Mt 27:20-26); and, knowing his innocence, the governor, condemned him to death (Mt 27,28).

The cross of Jesus is the radical condemnation of an unjust world (Gal 6,14). There is no escape from the cross, you have to stay with the one crucified on it or stand with the crucifiers, there is no middle way. All that God values is hated and killed by the world. What the world esteems, God abhors. Through Jesus, God offers the world equality, solidarity and mutual help, freedom, love, and happiness with God as its king and father. But domination, violence, injustice, the religious and civil power, the ruling class and the people seeking their security in institutions, hate life and give death. They prefer Caesar for king (Jn 19:15).

Yet God was not overcome. The young man told the joyful news to the women though his words were strange: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here." One would have expected more titles: Jesus the Messiah, the son of God. But no, the young man gave the plain story: Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth condemned as a criminal. And he affirms he has risen. It is God's total approval of the life and work of Jesus; the message and struggle Jesus underwent are sanctioned by God and the enemies of Jesus are God's enemies. Death suffered to save humanity leads to life. God is not indifferent to our strivings after liberation from hunger and oppression -- in this is contained his promise of resurrection for the followers of Jesus. History starts all over again: "He will go on before you into Galilee and you will see him there" (Mk 16:5-7).⁽¹⁵⁾

The Christian Community

Allegiance to Jesus and the following of his lifestyle are not things that can be done on one's own (Jn 6:44, 65); an interior change of heart is needed which John calls "to be born again" (Jn 3:3-8) and Paul, "the new humanity" (2Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) or "the new man" (Eph 4:24; Col 3:9-10). In other words to be capable of living like this one needs to receive the Spirit, the strength of God (Rom 8:2,4; Gal 5:16). Human selfishness is so strong that, unless God transforms a person, true love and authentic solidarity are impossible. According to the promise of Jesus, the disciples would receive God's Spirit and only then would they cease living for their own interests and be able to follow his example (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:5; 2:1-4, 38; 10:44; 11:17; 2 Cor 5:15).

The characteristics of the group of disciples were first, love of each other, then joy, peace, tolerance, kindness, generosity, loyalty, simplicity and self control (Gal 5:22-23; Col 3:12-13). It was a group without privileges, either racial, national, social, or of class or sex (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col. 3:11); a group where all barriers have fallen, in which all hostility has vanished, because Jesus Christ has made peace (Eph 2:13-16).

Thus is created the community in which there is no one on top or beneath, but all are last and first at the same time (Mt 19:30), sisters and brothers with one father, servants with one Lord, disciples with one master, poor men whose only riches and security are in God himself (Mt 6: 19-21; Mt 19:21). Here there is not mine or thine (Acts 4:32). It is a group filled with perfect joy (Jn 15:11; Jn 16:24), mutual affection (Rom 12:10; Col 3:12), swift and unlimited pardon (Mt 18:21-22; Col 3:13); where no rivalry or partisanship exists, but all are united in love (Col 3:14) and reciprocal support (Mt 5:7). Each one shoulders the burden of the others (Gal 6:2), the qualities of each are at the service of all (Rom 12:3-8; 1Cor 12: 4-11; Eph 4:11-13), and authority means greater service not superiority (Lk 22:26-27).

Besides the work of the Spirit in each one, the group as such must experience the presence of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor 13:5) and the action of his Spirit (Gal 3:5). This experience deepens faith in a way similar to the daily living together of the twelve with Jesus, which led them to recognize him as Messiah and Son of God (Mt 16:1). It has to be sustained with reflection on the message of Jesus, since the group lives to follow it, comparing personal and community actions with his teaching. For the disciples, the glorified Lord is salvation, life, joy, strength and hope (Col 3:4). Jesus in his earthly life and in his death is the way and the truth (Eph 4:20-24).

Only this experience in common prayer and the eucharist keep the community together and solves the tensions and difficulties that could arise (Phil 4: 4-7). It helps too, to sustain the feeble (Mt 18:12; Gal 6:1). Lower instincts that could spring up, rivalry and party spirit have no antidote but the Spirit of God (Gal 5:16); and the mission of the Spirit is to recall and interpret the message of Jesus (Jn 14:26; Jn 16: 13-15).

Prayer in common also expresses the joy of the faith that is voiced in thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ (Eph 5:18-20; Col 3:16), and a fellowship that finds its natural expression in the eucharist (Acts 2:42).

The Mission and the World

The group, by definition is not self-centred, for the disciples are "fishers of men" who are to attract others to the new way of living. This is not done for the sake of imposing personal ideas, but through the experience of their own happiness: the person who found the treasure and the pearl wants others to find it too (Mt 13:44-46).

For the mission, what is of primary and absolute importance is the existence of the group itself. If the new society of disciples does not exist as Jesus wanted, then everything is useless; there is nothing to offer but empty words and ideas. Love and happiness have to be seen to be possible. It is a sad sight to see bitter Christians trying to make others happy without themselves knowing what Christian joy and peace is. The renunciation of this world's values is made "for the joy" of having found the treasure (Mt. 13:44).

The group has to be visible and the good it does round about must be perceptible (Mt 4:14-16); the message has to be proclaimed without fear (Mt 10: 26-27), but prudently (Mt 7:6; 10:16).

The individual who announces the good news (Mt 10:5-15) appears as a poor person (without money or provisions), pleasant (greeting), simple (accepting hospitality), not demanding (not changing lodging, Mk 6:10), practical, convinced of the urgency of one's work (not wasting time in endless greetings, Lk 10:4) and the serious and important nature of the mission (if they don't listen, throw it in their faces and shake the dust from your sandals). Such a person must demonstrate the reality of salvation by curing the sick and casting out demons. That is, the one sent in some way personifies the community to which he belongs; the way of presenting oneself and working makes visible what he lives by; he or she offers the salvation that is already possessed.

John expresses the mission as being the instrument of the Spirit of God in his testimony against the world. The Spirit wants to prove to the world that the condemned Jesus was innocent and was right; that the world condemned him was the guilty one that is on its way to ruin (Lk 5:26-27; 16:8-11). Christians, then, have to face the world to denounce its evil as Jesus did (Jn. 7:7). We cannot leave the world undisturbed in its injustice.

Necessarily, this will provoke the world's hatred, and it will persecute the Christian group as it did Jesus (Jn 15:18-22; 16: 1-4). But there is no need to lose courage since the work is God's and Jesus has overcome the world (16:33). To those who in face of this Spirit-guided denunciation recognize their error, sins will be forgiven, but those who persist in evil will be held guilty (Jn 20:21-23). And we have to pray insistently that God will make an end of injustice in the world (Lk 18:1-8).

Another important aspect of the mission is our attitude in face of suffering and injustice. One cannot remain indifferent to suffering of whatever kind. Jesus never refused to heal a sick person, nor did he turn away from the sorrow of the widowed mother (Lk 7:11-17); he helped those pleading for their children (Mk 9:21-27; Jn. 4:50) and the man with the dying child (Mk 5:22-24). He had compassion on the people's ignorance and taught them tirelessly (Mk 6:34); a great crowd stayed with him three whole days and he gave them food when they ran short of provisions (Mk 8:1-3). And note well that this was done with persons who were not to be his disciples. He did not do good to gain followers but out of compassion. Many a time he forbade any publicity, which was the opposite to propaganda (Mk 1:44; 5:43; 7:36). For Jesus, to be in the public eye is not a sign of success nor does it contribute to the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:35-39; 6:45; 7:24).

Like Jesus, Christians have to feel compassion and sorrow for the suffering of others and to be ready to help improve their lot: this is where we have the Christian group commitment to the fight against injustice in the world. The first task is conscientization of the people - which was Jesus' work - opening their eyes to the causes of evil. They have to disprove the slogans of society, the first of which says that happiness consists in having, getting, being rich, standing in the lime light and dominating others. Idols created by ideologies have to be thrown down whatever their nature, and people have to be taught to judge acts according to their true value. That is, they have to work to create free men. In this they will do no more than imitate what Jesus did with the people of his times.

Then initiatives will be taken (and already existing ones supported) to alleviate human sorrow and overcome oppression and injustice. At the same time there will be no holding to the ideologies of power nor identifying such "liberating" activity with God's reign. To fight injustice is necessary and urgent, but in the thick of the struggle the Christian group has to remember that Jesus, unlike the Zealots, did not identify the reign of God with institutional reform.

However hard we try, as long as people do not change and God does not uproot ambition from the heart, injustice will continue to exist in one way or another. Jesus teaches that the solution does not lie in money and the power system; the salvation of human society is only possible through the coming of the kingdom of God in the group of those who "have chosen to be poor," where ambition and rivalry have been replaced by love and peoplehood. And God alone is able to make this come about by creating new people through his Spirit.

From all that has been said it must be clear how urgent it is for those who believe in Jesus to direct all their energies to building up communities which live the message in its fullness.

Endnotes

1. They did not trust ordinary tradesmen, who maybe had not paid ten percent of their products to the temple, and they organized their own co-operatives. This affected the simple merchants who felt despised, hence the antagonism they harboured for the Pharisees. On the other hand everything the Pharisees acquired, as well as their pots and plates had to be scrupulously washed, in case they were "soiled" or "impure." Besides all this, they went in for very complicated washings before meals, lest unknowingly their hands had touched something "impure" (Mk 7:1ff; Lk 11:38).
2. Among the Pharisees, highest in rank stood the scholars or scribes, the erudite teachers, who were ordained after forty years of age. They wore special dress, with tassels on their cloaks and hangings on forehead and arm with quotations from the Old Testament; they had disciples who waited on them and called them "father" or "guide," they occupied the first places at religious functions and banquets, and on the streets people greeted them with great respect. They were usually given the title of "rabbi" (my Lord, monsignor). The pharisaic obsession for observance of religious laws led many of them to picture God as a banker noting men's good and bad actions in his account book. If one happened to be in debt (a frequent occurrence), one could make up for it with sacrifices in the temple or works of mercy.
3. The population of Samaria, the central province, was not purely Jewish. Colonies of other nations and races had settled there and beliefs had become mixed. They had their own temple (Jn 4:10) but the Jews had destroyed it before the Christian era. In the time of Jesus, enmity between the Samaritans and Jews was very strong. That is why Jesus could not find lodging in the Samaritan villages (Lk 9:52-56). The worst insult for the Pharisees was to call him a "Samaritan" (Jn 8:48). For the Jews, Samaritans were heretics and pagans with whom they refused to have dealings (Jn 4,9).
4. The prophetic denunciation of the Old Testament had also been reformist: apart from a few fleeting glimpses of institutional change (e.g. Jer 31:31-34; offset by 33:19-26), the justice they demanded in the name of God ultimately respected the institutions that had come down to them.
5. The poor man of the O.T. was also the oppressed man, the one longing for justice, who in extreme distress had recourse to violence as the only way to alleviate his situation even if only for a time. In the last period of the O.T. a tendency began to emerge among the poor: "the poor of Yahve," who despairing of any human help had put all their trust in God, the only one capable of doing them justice and saving them from their misery. In fact, up to the time of Christ, that justice had not yet come.

6. Eternal life can be had if one is honest and just to one's neighbour in any state one may find oneself (Mk 10:17-18; Lk 10:25-28; 19:8-10; Mt 25:34-40,46).

7. The subsistence of the group is no mere question of good human administration; there is also the divine blessing (Mt 19-26), and what is impossible for man is done by God who knows very well what we need (Mt 6:8:31-33). What is asked is that we hold ourselves ready to help each other (Mt 5:7) and be generous (6:22-23). To feed the hungry was precisely the clear sign that Jesus was the Messiah, who came to give the good news to the poor, a lesson the twelve found so hard to swallow (Mk 8:14-21).

8. To be with Jesus it is not enough to be good, but one has to break with this perverse world. The acceptance of God's message cuts the disciples off from "this order" (cf Jn 17: 14-16). That is, those who are with Jesus have to reject the values "the present order" proposes. If God is the life-giver of the Christian group, the chief of the present order is Satan (Jn 8:44; 12:31; 14:30). The Christian group must be well aware of this incompatibility; they are not allowed to "belong to the world" (Jn 15:19) nor to adapt themselves "to this world" (Rom 12:12; 1Pet 1:14).

9. When Jesus dealt with the people, Jesus tried to liberate them from the ideas they had been taught which prevented their accepting the new mentality of the reign of God. Today we would call it, "conscientization."

10. In short, Jesus reduces the ancient Jewish religious law to a moral code similar to that of other religions and cultures and in doing so he opened the door to the pagans (Mk 3:7-8; Eph 2:15). For the group gathered round Jesus, the old law became too narrow because it was mainly concerned with externals and could not make people radically good.

11. If the rich asked him a favour he did it (Mk 5:22-24; 17:11-19), and he refused to discuss money matters (Lk 12:13-14).

12. He did not want preconceived ideas but a choice based on an experience; for which reason he will not allow the demons to proclaim his identity (Mk 1:24-25; 3:11-12), which would have been interpreted in a nationalistic sense. For the same reason he refused to give signs from heaven but asked people to observe everyday signs (Mt 16:1-4; Mk 8:11-13; Lk 12:54-56) that is, the facts.

13. Jesus had many struggles with the leaders in Galilee (Mk 2:1-12; 13-17, 23-28; 3:1-6; 8:11-12) and they had sent experts from the capital to investigate what was happening with that "provincial prophet." Naturally, they saw him in an unfavourable light (Mk. 22:7:1).

14. Jesus knew that his denunciation would bring about his death, but he still needed a little while with his disciples to give them his last instructions and prepare them for the trial. For this reason he hid himself so that the chiefs, who had already decided to kill him (Mk 14:1-2) had to wait for a disciple to betray him to be able to capture him (Mk 14:10-11).

15. Antisemitism in the Gospels? Sometimes the evangelists are accused of antisemitism. This is a mistake. What happened in Palestine could very well have happened in Greece or Rome if Jesus had lived and acted there; the world is the same all over. That it happened in Israel, among people specially prepared by God, is the most convincing proof that power and riches necessarily make people deaf to the voice of God and ready to murder his prophets (Mt 23: 29-37; cf. Lk 16:29-31). It has been easy for Christians to throw the blame of the death of Jesus onto the Jewish people as such; in doing that they saved themselves the trouble of a confrontation forced on them by the Gospel. It was not the Jewish race that rejected and killed Jesus, but the violence proper to money and power which is as present and as evil in other peoples and at other times as it was in Palestine in the first century.