

As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' [...] Freely you have received, freely give.

In this chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the apostles have just been chosen by Jesus. He has called them by name and given them special powers to cast out unclean spirits and the ability to heal every disease and infirmity. He then gives them instructions on where and how to carry out their first mission. In fact, the message they are to proclaim is clear: 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'¹

The stipulation to proclaim this message *as they go* emphasises two things. First and foremost, true disciples should proclaim the closeness of the Kingdom but it is also true that their relationship, as they journey forward together, should also witness to this message. In fact, in John's Gospel, after giving the new commandment, Jesus says: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'²

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The 'kingdom of heaven' is at the heart of Jesus' proclamation. The similar expression, 'kingdom of God', is used in the Old Testament to indicate God's lordship, governance and saving action in human history. He is the ruler of the world and especially of the people of Israel, who were waiting for a descendant of King David to restore Israel's role among the nations. In the New Testament, Jesus himself is presented as this descendant and therefore king. Unlike a temporal kingdom, the 'kingdom of heaven' is a reign of peace and justice where forgiveness and reconciliation and care for the needy prevail, bringing light and life to all nations. It is a kingdom that already exists in the world and in the human heart but will only reach fulfilment at the return of Jesus.

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Jesus announces that the kingdom is close in time. It is imminent. Parables such as that of the mustard seed or the leaven in the dough indicate that the kingdom grows humbly and mysteriously but with great tenacity.

'Near' also has a spatial meaning. When the disciples, who carry the presence of Jesus' spirit, approach on foot, the kingdom of God approaches, and when, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus says to the scribe, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God',³ he probably meant not only 'you have begun to understand' but also 'you are not far from me'.

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The word 'freely' translates a term that in the original Greek means 'as a gift'. This highlights that what the apostles received was not given to them because they deserved it. Instead, the source is God's generosity and the fact that they were chosen for a special mission.

Chiara Lubich writes: *'The kingdom of God must therefore be welcomed. It is a gift that God gives you. In fact, no human effort, no ascetic endeavour, no study or intellectual research can bring you into the kingdom of God. It is God himself who comes to meet you, who reveals himself with his light or touches you with his grace. There is no merit that you can boast of, or rely on, to be entitled to such a gift from God. The kingdom is offered to you freely.'*⁴

Today, we too are called to welcome this gift. We are invited to continue the task that Jesus entrusted to the apostles, that is, to proclaim with words and deeds that the kingdom of God is near. Even in this troubled and uncertain world, we are called to announce a message of hope to everyone we meet. God loves the world and each one of us immensely.

*Edited by Augusto Parody Reyes
and the Word of Life Team*

¹ Mt. 10: 7.

² Jn 13: 35.

³ Mk 12: 34.

⁴ C. Lubich, *Word of Life*, October 1979.