

Church of the Divine Love

Sermon Sunday January 24, 2021

Jonah 3: 1-5,10; Psalm 62: 6-14; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20.

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

In last week's readings the theme was a calling to discipleship. Young Samuel is called by God, and Samuel responds by saying, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist announces Jesus as the Lamb of God, and two of his disciples turn and follow Jesus. In the former, God calls Samuel directly; in the latter the calling is a calling of the heart. Samuel was already serving God by being an acolyte of the priest Eli. The two disciples of John the Baptist were already in a preliminary discipleship. These, you could say, were a calling of the righteous. Yet in the Second Reading last week, St. Paul is calling us to turn away from a material life, a life dominated by the body, an immoral life to a life of the Holy Spirit through whom our bodies have become a temple. There is a noticeable distinction between a calling of the righteous and a calling of sinners. St. Paul's preaching of repentance, however, connects us to today's readings, of which the primary theme is repentance, a calling of sinners.

Jonah is sent by God to Nineveh to preach a warning of their looming destruction. The people of Nineveh repent, and God relents in his just anger. St. Paul is preaching the coming of a new way of life, a turning away from a worldly life which is "passing away," to a life beyond this worldly life, which tends toward sinfulness. The preaching of Jonah and the preaching of Paul are a calling of repentance, but not merely a turning away from sin to virtue but doing so in preparation for something beyond this life, preparation for the coming life which virtue leads us to. In today's Gospel Jesus is more specific in proclaiming that new life as "the kingdom of God."

"Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." This was the message John the Baptist was sent to preach and his baptizing was a "baptism of repentance." John was sent to "prepare the way of the Lord;" a mission of preparation for the coming of the Messiah. "After John was arrested," Jesus takes up this preaching mission with the same message as John, "repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." John is preparing for the coming of the Lord, Jesus is proclaiming the coming of The Kingdom. Does this mean that Jesus is the Kingdom? Is Jesus prophesying God's Kingdom as a realm to come? Yes, both. In baptism preparation we speak of being baptized into Christ, and initiation into the Church. Here again we see the overlapping phenomenon of the Kingdom of God; Christ and the Kingdom of God are one. The Church, as the Bride of Christ, is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is proclaimed throughout the four Gospels. In Matthew it is referred to as "the kingdom of heaven." This is because Matthew was preaching primarily to Jewish converts, and under Jewish law it was forbidden to speak the name of God, Yahweh, except on the Day of Atonement, when it was spoken by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies.

So, what is the hermeneutic of “the Kingdom of God?” In the Lord’s prayer we pray “. . . Thy Kingdom come,” which seems to imply the Kingdom is not yet. In the naïveté of our early catechesis, it seemed obvious that the Kingdom of God is heaven. When we die, we go to heaven, we enter the Kingdom of God. Matthew’s reference reinforces this. The Kingdom of God is mentioned 48 times in Matthew, 17 times in Mark, 33 times in Luke, and 2 times in John. Sometimes in future tense, sometimes in present tense. If we look back at the original preaching of John and Jesus, we may find the key to its hermeneutic. “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” This can and has been thought of as “near,” the Kingdom of God is nearby. In Mark (12:34) Jesus says to the rich young man, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” Even with this it seems that “it is near.” In Matthew (12:28) and Luke (11:20) Jesus says, “the Kingdom of God has come upon you,” in Matt (21:31) Jesus tells the chief priests and the elders that “prostitutes and tax collectors are entering the Kingdom of God before you,” and again in Luke (17:21) He says the Kingdom of God “is among you.” Here we are beginning to hear of the Kingdom of God as, not only near but here, in the present.

The message of the kingdom of God is the most important news ever delivered to humans. Jesus came to earth to announce the arrival of this kingdom and to establish it in people’s hearts through His death and resurrection. As the Son of God, Jesus Christ was the exact likeness of His Father and represented Him perfectly on earth. To all those who believed in and followed Him, Jesus restored their citizenship rights in the kingdom of heaven and impacted His Spirit, so that they could represent Him and the government of heaven on earth. This representation is known as government diplomacy. Jesus came to bring salvation, to institute the Church and the Sacraments. From then on, the Kingdom spreads as a spiritual phenomenon in the manifestation of the Church in the world through evangelization and within us through Baptism as the Holy Spirit and Sanctifying Grace dwelling in our soul. When we pray “Thy Kingdom come,” we are praying for the continuance of that spiritual growth, in the world and within us; that it continues to come as Jesus brought it. Whatever your life is, however, you spend your time, there is in that life Jesus’ call to “Follow me.” “Follow me” is the call to participate with God in God’s own saving work. It’s the work of change and growth. That work is always about moving to a larger vision, orienting our life in a new direction, and experiencing that our little story of life is connected to and a part of a much larger story of life, God’s life.

The earth is the Lord’s and its fullness thereof, we pray in Psalm 24. This world belongs to God. He has set us in this world to do his work, but He only gives us a brief time to accomplish His tasks. We pray today that we make the best use of the time He gives us. Ultimately, it’s about letting go of our own little life so that we can receive God’s life. This letting go happens in the context of our everyday activities; work, school, families, paying the bills, running errands, fixing dinner, relationships, and trying to do the right thing. It happens in the casting and mending of our nets. These are the times and places Jesus show up and calls into a new way of being and our world changes. It happened for Simon, Andrew, James, and John. It can happen for you and me. **AMEN!**