

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time A

Repent for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand (Mt 4:12 ff.)

It is very difficult for us to go back to the Galilee of the days of Jesus. Happily major archeological and sociological contributions are now readily available to help us. We know much about that region that had not been known before. People had more time on their hands than in those rural areas for coming together and listening. The average discourse then took forty minutes to two hours. Great crowds hardly sat silent listening intently all the time. Exchange surely took place. Who was this Jesus who attracted them all? As a healer they wanted to touch him. He called the apostles to follow him, but not the crowd in the same way. However he called them all to repentance. They could not have understood easily all he said, for even the apostles had difficulty in understanding him.

The Setting

His ministry involved preaching and healing. One of his technical terms has puzzled people since, namely the 'kingdom of heaven'. The gospel never tells us what it was. We are always told what it was like. So the audience then must have known what 'kingdom' involved with its Old Testament background. But they might have got it wrong, interpreting it nationalistically. The reality Jesus talked of was not a spatial reality like 'The United Kingdom'. Nor was it the kingdom of Israel. In those days Palestine was under the Romans. The king in the Galilee region was a Roman puppet named Herod Antipas. He had arrested John the Baptist and, as Matthew presents it in today's reading, this was when Jesus took on his public mission. The real political power was in the hands of Pontius Pilate. He would seal the fate of Jesus later. In his own way he was trying to find out what Jesus meant by preaching the presence of a kingdom. Any kingdom not accepted by the Romans was a political threat. The Roman Empire was under an emperor. It was not a kingdom. What then was Jesus referring to?

The Kingdom

In the Old Testament Jews prayed for the coming of God's kingdom. God reigns, He is robed in majesty (Ps 93:1ff.). They expressed their hope that God would reign over them. If he did, then social and economic justice would prevail. Because exploitation was always rife. As well as the injustices among the Jews themselves foreign powers dominated their lives. Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah, which we have as our first reading at today's Mass, 'Land of Zebulun and Naphtali' - that very region of Galilee occupied by the Assyrians in the eighth century, would be restored to freedom. The same would be true of the southern regions of Benjamin and Judah which had fallen to the Babylonians in the sixth century. A Messiah would come. To answer the question what life would be like when God would reign through his Messiah Matthew declares that this is happening now with the appearance of Jesus. He began his message: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.

His characteristics

So appreciated for healing and preaching the ordinary people flocked to him. But during his own life-time the listeners knew little about him and his mission. The man for others from his humble background encountered great difficulties in calling people at all levels of society to change and repent. What they were being told was that whatever God wants Jesus does, and shows others how to do it. Anyone who accepts Jesus personally, and is about what he is about, belongs to the Kingdom of God. That is: they belong to God and are bringing about the will of God on earth.

Fundamental values

The meaning of all of this is being unfolded still. With the closure of Christian Unity week which ended yesterday we witness another phase in the life of the Church. We must recall the all embracing mission expressed in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* in the Second Vatican Council, chapter II, paragraph 16: “Nor is God himself far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God...those also can attain salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church...Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive, aided by his grace, to live a good life. Whatever goodness or truth is found amongst them, is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel, and as given by him who enlightens all people that they may finally have life.” (In St. John’s Gospel the ‘kingdom’ is ‘life’). The values of the kingdom are truth, justice, kindness, love, devotion for others, forgiveness and so on. Anyone who does these is not far from the kingdom. These days in dialoguing with other religions, and with all people, believers or not, we are seeking for and sharing kingdom values. Anyone helping a person in need, is subscribing to a kingdom value. It is not just a question of believers doing it – it is a question of anyone doing good and being encouraged to do so. The Church exists to serve the kingdom, to help bring about the values that it represents. But it is all God’s world and God’s work.

Here in an Augustinian house we can be helped by St. Augustine who resisted any monopoly of goodness reserved only to orthodox believers. It is a church of saints and sinners in the City of God (Cf. the data presented by T.J.van Bavel, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald OSA, Eerdmans, 1999,pp. 172ff.).

Conclusion

And we conclude with what St. Paul writes to the Romans- he normally spoke of salvation and rarely of the kingdom: “For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building (Rom 14:17-19).” A happy Sunday to you all. Amen.

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