

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 17, 2018

Christ's favorite topic, it could be argued, was "the Kingdom of God." His first public sermon began with "The Kingdom of God is at hand," and from then on he kept talking about it, as in today's Gospel. If there is a Kingdom, there must also be a King, and if there is a King, there must be subjects. That's how he sees the Church, as a Kingdom, not merely as some kind of club. Today we can ask ourselves if that's how we see Church. When we pray, "Thy Kingdom come," do we mean the same thing that Jesus meant when he taught us that prayer? God's Kingdom is the realm where hearts obey him out of faith and love. The kingdom of this world is the realm where hearts obey themselves out of self-centeredness, egoism, and fear. If we really want to help Christ redeem the kingdom of this world by transforming it, through his grace, into the Kingdom of Christ, we have to keep hearkening to the King and carrying out his commands, even when they are uncomfortable for our selfish tendencies. Obeying someone else, though, is almost always a challenge for us sinners. Jesus knows this, and so he doesn't ask us for blind, mindless obedience. He uses parables to explain and promise that by following and obeying him, our lives will be fruitful. The virtues that give true, lasting beauty to our lives, that give our lives meaning and deep happiness (virtues like wisdom, courage, self-control, and Christ-like love), are like the seeds in the Lord's parables. They are planted in our hearts at baptism, and as we follow and obey Christ in our daily lives, they grow and flourish. Being good citizens of Christ's Kingdom is the sure path to an abundant spiritual harvest here on earth and forever in heaven.

One threat to being good citizens of God's Kingdom is what spiritual writers call "falling into routine." Routine is just going through the motions of being a faithful Catholic, but forgetting about the meaning behind those motions. We have always gone to Mass and always prayed (or at least "said our prayers"), ever since we were kids, and we feel a kind of comfortable inertia in continuing to do so. We have a vague sense that one ought to do such things, and we also have a vague sense that if we fail to do them we will feel guilty for some reason. And we don't want to add an uncomfortable guilty feeling to our already over-stressed emotional world. So we keep going through the motions of being a Catholic. This is a threat for all of us, even priests and

deacons, because the real reasons behind our spiritual activities - like prayer, the sacraments, and moral discipline - are below the surface; we have to make an effort to keep them in mind. It's also a dangerous threat, because it dries up our personal relationship with Christ, which is what being a Christian is all about. I recently read an article on a blog for spiritual direction in which the author was reminiscing about an experience of sleeping over at a friend's house when he was in eighth grade. As he and his friend went down to the basement to go to bed, he saw his friends' parents sitting on the couch watching television, the wife cuddling against the husband, who had his arm around her. They looked like a happy couple. Two months later they were divorced. He asked his friend how they could be so happy together, and then get divorced. The friend told him that they just kept up appearances for the kids' sake, but they were just appearances. That's falling into routine; it's thinking of obedience to our King as a list of rules instead of as a relationship of love, and it chokes off our spiritual growth.

This is Father's Day weekend, the time when society "honors" fathers and those who are father figures. The problem is when I look around at pop culture, especially popular tv and movies, so many times fathers are the butt of the jokes, seen as bumbling fools, incompetent, or not needed at all. But that is our own fault, we are the ones who laugh at those things and make them popular. We can turn that around, we who are fathers need to take our job seriously. It is so easy to get stuck in a routine where our family is just another thing we have to do, to check off the list of things to do today. Our job is to live for the Kingdom of Heaven and to lead our families into that Kingdom no matter whether we are married, divorced, or a single father. Let's give our kids a reason to celebrate us as fathers.

One of the easiest ways to be a more productive citizen of this Kingdom, to be true to our high Christian calling, is with our words. Words are particular to human beings. For decades, scientists have been trying to teach dolphins and chimpanzees to talk, but they haven't succeeded. Language is one of the great gifts God has given to human beings. It is meant to help us know one another, express our experience, and build up the human community. Unfortunately, after original sin, it became an instrument of destruction. Lies, gossip, innuendo, destructive criticism - these cause more pain than all the earthquakes and hurricanes combined. They wound hearts. They divide families, communities, and nations. They cause feuds, infidelity, revolutions, and

wars. Christ came to redeem humanity from original sin. He came to redeem language too. Imagine how different the world would be if just half of us Christians never gossiped, never put up with gossip, never lied or listened to lies, never spoke badly of our neighbors, and made a special effort to speak well of people when they are not around. That's the ideal we are striving for in building up Christ's Kingdom; that's the kind of King we serve. Jesus tells us to "stop judging... stop condemning". He wants us to use this great gift of language to build up our neighbors, our families, and our communities. Let's ask Christ's forgiveness for the times we have used language to tear people down, and let's ask for the grace to be better stewards of this gift in the future. After all, we are not just members of a religious club; we are followers and ambassadors of the eternal King.