

Keeping your focus on Jesus

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 11, 2011 | The Peace Pulpit

In order to listen deeply and carefully to the lesson of this Liturgy of the Word, it's important for us to remind ourselves of the context in which these three lessons are provided for us today.

It goes back a number of Sundays where Jesus first began his public life and proclaimed the Good News. "The Reign of God is at hand. Change your lives. Something new and important is going to happen."

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The Reign of God is at hand, and over the last few Sundays, we've been hearing parables about the Reign of God helping us to understand what the Reign of God means.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

We've been instructed on how we live within this Reign of God. Today we are receiving further understanding of the Reign of God and what it means for us to participate or enter into the Reign of God.

First of all, it's very important for us to understand what Jesus means when he says the Reign of God is at hand.

Sometimes in the Bible or the Gospels, we talk about the Reign of God as the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. That's an acceptable alternative phrasing, but it can mislead us because when you think of the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven, you think of a place.

That's not what Jesus means by the Reign of God. By the Reign of God, Jesus is talking about what we might call the dynamic rule of God's saving love. It's all about our relationship with God.

If we enter into the Reign of God, we allow ourselves to be drawn into this dynamic rule or guidance of God's love. Everything in all of creation has been made to exist because it's drawn into being by love. Each of us is drawn out of nothingness by the love of God.

So, when the love of God prevails everywhere, in every person, throughout all of creation, we will have the fullness of God's Reign, God's love overseeing everything.

Very briefly: a couple of the parables that we heard over the last few Sundays help us to understand the Reign of God. The Reign of God is like a mustard seed. It's very small. It seems insignificant, but if you plant it and let it grow, it becomes large, the largest of all the trees. The Reign of God is dynamic. It grows. The Reign of God, Jesus says, is like a little bit of yeast put into a large batch of dough. That tiny bit of yeast ferments all of the dough and makes it rise. It changes it and transforms it.

So the Reign of God, the dynamic love of God is a transforming power within our lives, within the world and within creation.

Last Sunday Jesus gave us kind of a sense of what it would really mean if we entered fully into the Reign of

God and really let the dynamic love of God guide us.

Remember, last Sunday was the story about when they were out in the desert place. They were out of food and Jesus says to the disciples, "Do you have anything?" They said, "Five loaves and two fishes." Jesus says, "Make everybody sit down and eat." He tells the disciples, "Begin to distribute." What happens? It's a marvelous miracle. Everyone begins to share and at the end, they have 12 baskets left over.

The Reign of God means that everyone would have a full human life, where all of us would be sharing with one another, not trying to grasp and hang onto something just for myself. The Reign of God is the dynamic love of God, spreading through our lives, through our world, through our universe.

Today, we get some further instruction about the Reign of God. The first lesson is especially important I think because it guides us into a way that we can begin to penetrate the meaning of what Jesus has been teaching us, and where we're called to go.

Part of our mission as disciples of Jesus is to keep on trying to enter into that dynamic love of God and help to bring about the transformation of our world into the Reign of God. We'll only understand how to do this, only be changed in order to do it when we enter deeply into our own spirit.

Elijah was running away because he had been preaching God's word and was being attacked for it. He was upset and afraid, so when he gets to Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai, he had this profound experience of God.

But notice -- and I'm sure because it is so dramatic -- God doesn't come in an earthquake. God doesn't come in the storm. God doesn't come in the fire. God comes in what Scripture says is a whispering, gentle breeze. It's very quiet. If you're not entering deeply into yourself, you won't hear it.

To really understand the Reign of God and be changed by it, we must take that time, even as Jesus was going to do as He got drawn away. Go apart on the mountaintop and pray. Be alone and listen to God speaking within your spirit.

In St. Paul's letter to the Romans, another passage that we heard earlier this year, Paul tells us how the God's spirit speaks to our spirit in the depth of our being. We can hear that spirit speaking if we take some time to listen. That will enable us then to enter into this dynamic rule of God's love.

Then today's Gospel also teaches us more about the Reign of God.

This Gospel lesson was written, the Gospel of Matthew, was not put together until around the year 80, and by that time, the Church was already into struggles, and there were dissensions within the Church. Some people were falling away even. There were attacks of people against one another. It was a time of turmoil.

Matthew, in putting the Gospel together, offers this event that he remembers for the time he had been with Jesus. It's a very easy image to see the boat as the Church, tossed about by the waves, by the storm, but what's the one thing that will bring calmness, quiet and peace? Keeping your focus on Jesus. Peter was walking across the water. Once he began to notice the waves, the lightning, and the storm, and took his eyes off Jesus, he began to sink. So the lesson, very clearly, is watch Jesus.

Look at Jesus until, in your quiet, gentle prayers, you're listening. Think about Jesus. Focus on who he is, what he did, what he said, how he acted and that will bring you guidance, bring you calmness, and bring you peace.

Then, as we do that of course, when we understand more fully what the Reign of God is, we will also be able to carry out the work that Jesus gives to us.

When Jesus says, "The Reign of God is at hand, change your lives, follow me," He's drawing us into his work, which again is to transform our world into as close an image of that Reign of God as possible.

When we focus on Jesus, listen to him, watch how he acts, and imitate him, we enter into his work and gradually we'll bring our Church and our world into the Reign of God, the fullness of life, the peace and joy. This is what Jesus promises.

So today, as we hear God proclaiming His Word in our midst, I hope that we will decide that there are times where I must go apart, be in quiet prayer and listen, but then also keep my focus on Jesus so that I follow him and enter into his work of making the Reign of God happen.

[This homily was preached at St. Aloysius Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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