

**Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Jan 22, 2006)**

It's Time

We just heard the first words Jesus speaks in Mark's Gospel: It's time! The kingdom is here! Repent and believe!

It's time! Time for what? Time for God's definitive revelation of who God is in the person of Jesus Christ; time to begin the work of salvation; time to let the world know once and for all that God loves it; that God is defined by mercy and compassion.

The kingdom is here. What is the kingdom? Volumes have been written about it, but let's try a simple description that will work for us here. The kingdom is that community of people who under the leadership of Jesus are doing the will of God. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us to say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." These two petitions go together. Indeed they may both be saying the same thing. When people do the will of God, the kingdom happens.

And what is the will of God? That's what the rest of the Gospel will be about. But of course we have all read the Gospel, and we know that Jesus will spell out the will of God for us in the two great commandments: love God above all and your neighbor as yourself.

What are the conditions for entry into the kingdom? Repent and believe the good news.

Repent: that is, reform your lives. The Greek word that Mark uses means to have a complete change of heart. It means not just turning away from things of the past that stand between us and God. It also means turning to Jesus and to the kingdom to which he is inviting us. Repent here is a positive thing; not a negative thing. It's a life-enhancing movement. By repenting not only will we become better people, but our world will be a better world.

In that first reading that we heard from the Book of Jonah there is a lot of repenting. First of all at Jonah's preaching, the pagan city of Nineveh turned from its evil ways and believed in God. Then, the story says, God repented. Even God can have a change of heart: in this case God repented

his resolve to destroy the city and all its inhabitants if they did not repent. God actually changed the divine mind in favor of a repentant people.

Now permit me, please, a slight digression here. I'll bet you thought the Book of Jonah was about a man who spent three days in the belly of a whale. Well, it isn't. It's about God's compassion, God's love and willingness to change, to repent. It's also about the presence of God in our world. Jonah thought he could escape God by running from Israel. He thought God could only be found in the Holy Land, the holy city, and its temple. But God let him know otherwise. Jonah learned that God is everywhere. That our God is a God not just of the people of Israel, but of all people, including those pagans, foreigners, and Gentiles, that Jonah thought were excluded from God's plan of salvation. They would not be excluded from the gift that Jesus came to bestow upon us all.

Having announced that the kingdom is here and stated the conditions for belonging, Jesus begins the work of spreading the kingdom. And what is the first thing he does? He begins to gather disciples. It's both a practical thing and a symbolic thing. From a practical point of view, he needs help. In spite of the fact that he is the Son of God, he can't do it all by himself. And so he gathers a group of people about himself, people who would live with him, listen to him, watch him, and who would then be prepared to go out and say and do the things they had learned from him. The symbolic thing was that this group formed a community, a community of people under the leadership of Jesus who were doing the will of God. They were a living embodiment of what he proclaimed: the kingdom of God is here.

Well, you know, the kingdom of God is here, too. We trust that we are all part of that kingdom. But we have to be careful. One of the dangers that has always threatened the Church is to think that somehow the kingdom is exclusively ours, like those people of Jonah's time, and of Jesus' time, and even perhaps of our time, people who feel that God belongs to them and not to anyone else. The kingdom is bigger than us. Even membership in the Roman Catholic Church is no guarantee that we are part of the kingdom. Not unless we repent, not unless we have a change of heart and enthusiastically embrace the way that Jesus showed us in the Gospels, not unless we can be like those disciples who did not hesitate to leave everything and follow him. The question is: what does it mean for us

today, in our time, in our station in life, with the circumstances and responsibilities that are part of our life, what does it mean to have a change of heart, to leave all things and follow him? Quite simply it means to do what God wants us to do right here and now. It means accepting the responsibilities that are part of our station in life. It means allowing God to help us overcome our fears and our anger, our resentments and our selfishness. That's how we have a change of heart.

One thing I suggest for our consideration today is the unfortunate division that exists in the Body of Christ. We are in the middle of the week of prayer for Christian Unity. By God's design, by God's desire, we are meant to be one. Remember Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper: that they be one, that they all may be one as you Father are in me and I am in you, that they all may be one in us. The sad fact is that we are not one.

There are many reasons why we are divided, some of them are doctrinal, most of them are either emotional or political, questions of power and authority. Recent conversations between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches show that doctrinal differences can be worked out. The emotional and political ones are the big stumbling block – or so it seems to me. How do we deal with them? Well. Jesus gives the answer: repent, have a change of heart. Open our minds to other possibilities. Reach out to embrace not just those who sit beside us in the same pew or in the same church. What about those nearby in Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches? What about our Orthodox brothers and sisters? As usual, of course, it's easier to say these things than it is to do them. And I'm sure there must be some of you who are thinking: but what's the use? Our feeble efforts will not change the overall situation. But that's a temptation that we should flee the way we would flee some wild beast that's threatening to tear us apart – which is exactly what it is. If we followed that reasoning we would not provide a meal and a bed for homeless men and women here every winter. Our efforts will not get rid of hunger and homelessness in Washington – but it's a step in the right direction. And that's true of whatever efforts we make, feeble or otherwise, in the direction of Christian unity.

Do you want to know how to begin? How to help bring about Christian unity? How to help God in the work of the kingdom? How to

change the world? It would happen if we all changed one human heart:
our own.