

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time + 21 Jan 2024 + I Cor 7:29-31 + Mk 1:14-20

In our Gospel according to Mark today, we hear the very first sermon that Jesus ever preached—indeed, these are among His very first words recorded in the Scriptures. It is as if Jesus has been preparing in silence for about 30 years, and now, He speaks. So, His first words must be of utmost importance. And what does He say? *This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.* So let's look at these words in more detail.

First: *This is the time of fulfillment.* Immediately, we might ask, “*the fulfillment of what?*” Well, it would not be an overstatement to say, “*the fulfillment of all human history!*” Because all that the Old Testament Law required, all that the Prophets foretold, and all that the Psalmists sang of, is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The People of Israel were looking for a Saviour—a King anointed by God who would gather them back as a People, conquer their enemies, and inaugurate a new and everlasting Kingdom of David. Jesus' audience doesn't know it yet, but what He is announcing, and calling them to believe in, is that *Jesus* is that Kingdom of God, in the flesh, now present among them! Yes, the time has finally come!

But here we might ask, how can a *person* also be a *kingdom*? Well, this is a very important principle of our faith, that many people get wrong: that the Kingdom of God is not some earthly paradise that will come about if we just think good really thoughts, seek progress, and pass better laws. Rather, the Kingdom of God is present wherever God the Father reigns, and He reigns most completely in the person of His Son Jesus. But by extension, we can also say that the Kingdom of God is also present on earth in any human heart where Jesus Christ reigns as King, as Lord. But that is easier said than done. To make Jesus King of your heart means that you are willing to renounce all other claimants to the throne of your heart—even yourself. And that is *really* hard. Jesus tells us today that this is only possible by walking down two long, difficult roads: the roads of *repentance* and *belief*.

So He goes on: *Repent!* At the beginning of each Mass, we have the opportunity to repent together by saying the “penitential act.” We have 3 different options for this act, but most Sundays, we profess together what is called the *Confiteor*, which means in Latin, *I confess*. You know how it goes on. But we should really *think* about what it is we are saying here; this is why I pause for a moment, to allow us to truly make an interior act of repentance. Because in the Greek, Jesus' command to repent is grammatically in what is called the “imperative mood”, meaning, He is issuing an *order*, an urgent demand: *Repent!* Now! Literally, our word *repent, metanoia* in Greek, means *to change your mind*. It means to think not as human beings do, but as God does (cf. Mt 16:23). And this is why repentance is so difficult! As we said, it means that I must knock myself down from the throne of my heart and instead enthrone Jesus Christ as my Lord. And that goes against not only our fallen human nature, but a culture that shamelessly idolizes the individual self as god.

But there is more. The full sense of the word *metanoia* means that this *change of mind* leads to a profound *change of life*. It means determining in your heart to turn toward God and to abandon all that leads you away from God. We are in very different world than what existed only 20 years ago. Gone are the days when being a Christian was a socially-acceptable thing to be. It takes real courage and conviction today to follow Christ, because the world is speeding in the other direction. We are immersed in a society that is opposed to the Word of God: most TV shows and commercials, popular music and movies, and even increasingly our country's laws are opposed to God. It's no fun sounding the alarm, but my friends we are being called to a new era of a truly heroic, genuine practice of the Catholic faith, if the Church is going to endure into the future.

But here's the thing: you cannot live this heroic, counter-cultural life if you don't *believe*. In a few moments, we will all make another profession: the ~1,750 year-old *Credo*, which in Latin means, *I believe*. But do I really believe? Do I live like I believe? After all, the Creed contains some seemingly incredible claims: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of Christ and His faithful followers from the dead, His Ascension into heaven, His 2nd coming in glory, and eternal life in the world to come. Even if I do not fully understand all these things, I can choose to trust not in my own knowledge but in the knowledge of God.

And why believe in this *Gospel*—this “Good News”? Well, belief is something that all of us have to eventually do for ourselves. But I can tell you why I believe. First, I was given the grace of faith through Baptism. God planted the seed. But as I have grown, I would say that it is *witnesses* to the faith that have had the greatest impact on my faith. I believe because of the 2,000+ years of Catholic martyrs—people like Simon, Andrew, and James—who were willing to die for the truth of their faith. I believe because of people I met along the road of my life whose repentance and belief in Christ so radically changed them, that I cannot deny that there is something more than can be humanly explained going on in their lives. I believe because the Lord gave me a mind to learn and to ponder, and the arguments for the Truth of the Catholic faith far outweigh the arguments against. And I believe because the Lord has shown me through a lot of prayer how the Father has always taken care of me.

Once we have truly accepted Jesus' first sermon, His first call, through repentance and belief in Him as our Lord, we come to realize that so many of the things in this world that we strive after, thinking that they will make us happy, are really nothing compared to the kingdom of God that is Christ already present in our hearts. This encounter with Christ was so powerful, that as we hear in our Gospel today, Saints Simon, Andrew, James and John left *everything* to follow Jesus. St. Paul encourages us in our 2nd reading today to follow their example: *For the world in its present form is passing away*. Something so much greater than anything the world can offer is here: *the Kingdom of God is at hand*.