

January 25, 2009
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

Today's Gospel presents Mark's summary of the teaching of Jesus. Precisely because the Messiah was beginning his public ministry in Palestine, everything would change. The time of fulfillment so many had hoped for, had in fact arrived. The Kingdom of God was indeed "at hand."

Jesus called upon his fellow Jews to "repent and believe in the gospel." He didn't just want them to be sorry for the past. He longed for them to turn their lives around and to believe in their hearts that his message was good news. And it is the same message he brings to us today. We too are to turn our lives around. We too are to believe that Jesus' coming has changed everything. And we're to live as if we believe it.

But what is the Kingdom or Reign of God? Is it still "at hand" almost 2000 years after Jesus' original proclamation? And is there any way we can recognize it? The Lord's Prayer gives us a hint in two well-known lines: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." They mean exactly the same thing. God's kingdom is present whenever and wherever God's will is in effect.

But how do we know what God's will is? People of faith disagree all the time about what constitutes God's will and how we can recognize it. Hindsight can work very well. To take one dramatic example: were the destructive wars and persecutions that followed the Protestant Reformation God's will? Christians on all sides of those struggles were saying yes, absolutely. Today most of us would say "no way," and I think we would be correct.

What happens, however, when we look at an event much closer to our own time, one that some of us still remember: the Second World War? Was it God's will for the Allies to fight and win? As Christians we recall Jesus' teachings about loving our enemies, forgiving as often as we need to forgive, and caring for people beyond our immediate circle of family and friends. Yet—wouldn't the horrific evils of that era have been far worse if Britain, the U.S. and their allies had not acted? Discerning God's will becomes a bit more complicated.

And let's look at today. What is God's will for the broken world economy? What is God's will for people who are hungry or homeless or without decent health care? What is God's will for the earth, its climate and all living things? How can we act according to God's will? I do not think we can know with certainty in every instance. Even our leaders have been wrong in the past. There's that hindsight again. But we don't have to give up. There are some good guides.

For starters, there's the Bible. That's why our diocese is asking us to deepen our knowledge and appreciation of it. Now, anyone can pick a verse from the Scriptures to justify anything—this is true. But if we look at how God reveals God's self throughout the Bible and particularly in the life and the teachings of Jesus, we can certainly get an idea of what God's will is. In Genesis, God looks at all creation and finds it very good. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God calls the people back to fidelity and love no matter how badly they've messed up. Jesus tells us to love one another as he has loved us. And the author of Revelation describes a transformed world where there will be no more weeping or mourning, where even death will be defeated. Doesn't this say something about what God wants?

Then there's the Church. There is wisdom in the community of faith that may not be found in individual Christians. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is the work of our leaders to point us toward this collective wisdom.

And there's creation itself, the so-called natural world. How does the universe function, according to our present understanding? How did life evolve? Isn't that God's will too?

But let's get back to that term, the kingdom. Why did Jesus speak of God's will being done in terms of the arrival of a kingdom? He wished, I believe, to contrast it with the various kingdoms that were familiar to his contemporaries. He was saying then—and he says today—that God is the ultimate authority, not the Roman emperor or any other human leader or organization.

And finally, what sort of "king" is God; what kind of kingdom did Jesus bring? My very brief summary of the Bible mentioned love more than once. Jesus' Great Commandment is all about love. We might even say that God is the king of love. So I think that it is safe to conclude that when we see authentic love, the kingdom of God is at hand.

Amen.