

Homily: August 1-2, 2015

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Kingdom and Eucharist

If Jesus were given the opportunity to design the front page of the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* or *Newsday* for just one day, and to pick the top, banner headline, what would He choose to say?

We know from the Gospel: The headline would say, *The Kingdom of God is at hand!* And the sub-head would say, *No more fear and worry! God is taking charge of history!* (That's a free translation of, "Repent": Sure, we have to get ourselves into shape for the coming of God's Kingdom, but that means not so much polishing up our morals as it does letting go of what holds us back from embracing the Good News with joy and abandon: If God is really taking charge of where our life, and the lives of those we love, and in fact God is in charge of every single sparrow, ladybug, star, and galaxy – selfishness will only cut us off from the cosmic party that's right now getting underway.

But: Can you remember yesterday's headlines in the papers? It's the same problem Jesus faced: The announcement of the best news of all time – whatever happens along the way, in the end God's way wins – that Good News story gets buried by our other preoccupations. Jesus wanted to be sure that that wouldn't happen among His followers; and that's where today's Scriptures fit in.

Somebody once said that you can best understand the Mass as a family meal with a really, really long "grace" before we finally start to eat. Jesus told his friends, "to remember me, do *this!*" To keep the headline in their awareness, to remember and trust that *God is taking charge of history; there's no need to worry or to fear!* - they are to sit down together every week over bread and wine. We eat and drink in the presence of one another and of the Risen Jesus to jog our memories and to gin up our courage: *This* is what awaits us, and God is already at work fashioning the "new heavens and new earth" where "every tear will be wiped away."

That confidence is what gave the martyrs courage as they faced death: *No matter what happens to me in the meantime, God's way always wins.* The martyrs didn't – and still don't – go to their deaths for a moral code; they don't suffer for a catechism or for doctrine. They accept their fates because they've discovered something: *God will make it come out right in the end, because God is taking charge of history.* The Mass is the weekly reminder of that foundation of every Christian's hope.

Just now, because Fr. Gabriel is having trouble getting back here after his mother's death in Ghana and Fr. Gius is away, I'm getting to sit down to this particular meal four times this weekend. (Can you imagine eating four Thanksgiving Dinners in 24 hours?) So I can sympathize with any of you saying, "My experience of Mass isn't exactly delightful, encouraging, inspiring, and energizing week after week." I can understand.... But:

Maybe that dullness is in part because we forget what we're doing, or get so distracted by petty details that we ignore the main thing. (There's a story that Sir Alec Guinness [who was a convert to Catholicism and is perhaps better known to some of you as Obi-Wan Kenobi], was once asked after he got back from church, "How was Mass today?" His response was, "Oh, the usual: Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, Real Presence of Jesus Christ our Lord..." The main point.)

Think of it this way: Lots of people are trying to get a ticket to see the Pope when he comes to the U.S. this fall (we're getting calls at the parish already about it, and no, we have no information about how to get to see him.) But would the Pope himself prefer that you came to see him? Or would he prefer that you went to meet the Risen Jesus? I think we know the answer; but somehow that doesn't cross our minds on a Sunday morning... Mass – every Mass – is much more amazing, and much more important, than any papal visit.

I understand people who don't believe or who have lost their faith, and who think that Mass is only a social ritual so they take a pass on going. If that's what I thought, I'd stay in bed on Sunday mornings too. If Mass were nothing other than a bit of socializing with some generally-nice people, and an occasional coffee hour, there'd be no reason to get out of bed. What I can't understand is people who say they believe the Risen Christ is truly present in the Eucharist – and yet stay away on a Sunday when nothing is standing in the way of their coming –except, possibly, forgetfulness of Who we meet here and why we do this.

And I think that missing Mass has an effect: as Jesus predicted, when we don't "eat and drink" with one another we forget the Good News and we can't live by it. We start thinking that something else – something other than God's love – is in charge of how our lives go, and we prepare ourselves to defend against what might threaten us about that. We become suspicious, or greedy, or stoic, and we expect the worst. The headline story about God's love gets forgotten, and so people live instead by the stories that the culture tells, unsatisfying as they may ultimately be.

Since you're here on a hot, sunny weekend in August, among all the empty seats, you're most likely really faithful about coming to Mass: so we are the people who have the job, by our excitement about what Mass is and does, who can best invite others to come back, or to become more regular in attending.

So let's sharpen our own focus on why we're here: Here we meet the Risen Christ who reminds us of the Good News that God is in charge, no matter how bleak our lives look. There is not only reason to hope, but we can be confident that, in the end, God's way wins – for us, for all we love, and for all of history and all of creation. There's no need to worry; no need to be afraid.

The Mass is the family meal each week for people who don't ever want to forget the headline Jesus wrote: Our loving God is in charge! Let's let that sink in; let's treat the Mass as the precious gift it is; and let's live through the week trusting its message.