

HOMILY SUNDAY 03 – YEAR A (Homily 02)  
“Ecumenism, Kingdom and the Church”  
(Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27; 1 Cor 1:10-13; 17-18; Mt 4:12-23)

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Have you ever heard anyone say, “I am okay with Jesus, but I don’t want anything to do with the Church”?

This week is the week of prayer for Christian unity. Fittingly, the readings today bring together Jesus, his Kingdom and the Church, as they are meant to be. One can never separate Jesus from the Church.

The first reading from the prophet Isaiah is full of *Kingdom of God language*. Isaiah predicts a time when the glory of God will be revealed. He foresees a time of light, joy and liberation from sin and oppression. He is speaking about the future kingdom of God, a kingdom of God that is coming and will come.

In the Gospel, we see the inauguration of the Kingdom in a very humble manner in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. We are told in the Gospel that the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled. Abruptly, Jesus proclaims that faith in him and repentance are the key to experiencing that kingdom. Believing and trusting in Jesus enough to surrender our lives to him through personal awareness, confession of sin and failings, and receiving his forgiveness and healing is the way the kingdom of God grows within us.

The first of action of Jesus, as part of his preaching and teaching, is to call disciples. His first priority is the Church. He begins to gather around him disciples, followers, believers, who would form the nucleus of what would become the Church, the new People of God, the Body of Christ. Jesus cannot be separated from the Church, because the Church is his Body.

To be the Church that Jesus wants us to be, however, is a monumental challenge. The Church is to mirror the kingdom of God, to help inaugurate the kingdom of God here and now, to lead the way into the kingdom of God.

We learn in the second reading to the Corinthians that the challenge to be Church was fraught with difficulties and divisions from the beginning. Paul has to deal with Christians who are divided, taking sides, not understanding that the Church is meant to be one. The reality of the challenge to balance the need to evangelize and to renew the Church was there from the beginning.

That need to balance evangelization by the Church and renewal of the Church is hinted at in the Gospel. The first disciples Jesus called, Peter and Andrew, were *casting their nets* into the sea. Casting nets is a symbol of the Church's constant mandate to evangelize, to reach out to the world, to spread the Good News of the coming of Jesus into this world and God's plan for salvation through him.

However, the next two disciples Jesus called, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were in their boat, *mending their nets*. Mending nets is a symbol of the constant need to be vigilant, to renew the weak areas of Church life, to repent of our hurtful behavior, confess our wrong doing, and receive forgiveness and healing that will help us evangelize more effectively.

It is interesting that the Greek word for the devil is *diablos*. That word means "division." It is not accidental that divisions would be what would afflict the Church the most from the beginning, for unity and oneness is precisely what Satan would fear the most in the followers of Jesus. The reason for that fear is that unity and oneness of heart and mind is what makes up the kingdom of God.

Divisions have always plagued the Church of Jesus Christ. The first great division was the schism between East and West, the Latin and the Orthodox Christians. Then came the Protestant Reformation, which led to three blocks of Christians - Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. The next phase was the division within Protestantism itself, with apparently around 33,000 different Christian denominations in the world as of 2005.

This, of course, is a scandal to the world, that the Church that Jesus founded should be so divided. The way forward in trying to heal the Church of these divisions is the ecumenical movement. Though it is a struggle, it is an important and even holy struggle to mend our nets.

At the same time, as best as we can, even with all our divisions, we must be about casting our nets, evangelization, reaching out collaboratively to especially the unchurched and the unbelieving world to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We are presented with two challenges today: to evangelize, and to renew the Church. Inter-religious dialogue remains the best way to evangelize those who do not believe in Jesus, and the ecumenical movement remains the best way to try to heal the divisions that continue to divide those who do believe in Jesus.

Pope Benedict speaks often of the importance of inter-religious dialogue. There is an ashram in India run by the Oblates that is totally dedicated to inter-religious dialogue. The Temple at the center of the ashram is decorated with religious symbols from all the major religions of the world. There are even two symbols representing First Nations spirituality. People go there to pray for people of other faiths, to study, to work towards unity. With regard to ecumenism, some dioceses such as the Diocese of Saskatoon have a Center for Ecumenism, and staff that are hired specifically for that purpose, to work for greater understanding and collaboration among the Christian Churches.

Each of us, in our own way, is called both to work at greater Christian unity, especially during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, as well as seek to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who do not believe in him. We are to be always both casting our nets, and mending our nets.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is the central prayer of our Catholic Christian faith. Let us pray that we will appreciate, understand and live it more fully, and that others may one day come to join us in that belief.

May we be both fishers of people, and renewers of faith, and may God bless us all in this task.