

HOMILY SUNDAY 26 – B
“Entering the Kingdom of God”

If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out! If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off!

My brothers and sisters, seek first the Kingdom of God.

In the gospel today, Jesus uses very strong words, shocking expressions. Why? What are we to make of them? May I suggest that he is using the *language of love* to teach us an important lesson – nothing is more important than ensuring our *entrance into the Reign of God*.

An example may help us understand. A daughter had been urging her aging father for months to move in with her, or to a nursing home, as he could no longer take care of himself. He consistently refused out of stubborn pride. Finally, she told him that unless he moved, she would *never come to visit him again!* That did it – he packed his bags and moved. Did she really mean what she said? Of course not - she was just exaggerating to get him to take action, and it worked. She was using the language of love.

It is that language that Jesus uses in the gospel today. Biblically, it is called Semitic hyperbole, a holy kind of exaggeration to make the point that the kingdom of God is the most important reality in our lives and nothing must distract us from that. In that light, it makes sense that Jesus would say, “If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off”.

The readings today not only underline the priority of the Kingdom of God in our lives, they also give us insights into the nature of that kingdom. The first insight is that the Kingdom of God is not about jealousy, power and control, but about *unity, inclusivity, tolerance and acceptance*. Moses is not bothered that two men are prophesizing in the tent, away from his gathering – he simply wants all people to be able to prophesy, be spirit-filled and praise God.

Jesus is the same in the gospel: he is not bothered that others who are not his disciples are healing in his name, though the disciples are somewhat jealous and tried to stop them. He states simply that those not against him are for him.

Today, we would call that a spirit of *ecumenism*. The Kingdom of God is at built up by a spirit of ecumenism. The ecumenical movement tries to dialogue with other denominations, to find common ground and collaborate in common action. As Cardinal Walter Kasper put it in one of his talks, ecumenism is not about converting one another, but rather about converting all to Christ.

Pope Paul II, in his first encyclical, put it this way: “We can and must immediately display to the world our unity in proclaiming the mystery of Christ in revealing the divine dimension of redemption and in struggling with unwavering perseverance for the dignity that each human being has reached and can continually reach in Christ. In this unity in

mission ... all Christians must find what unites them, even before their full unity is achieved.” (Redemptor Hominus, 11-12)

A second major insight into the nature of the Kingdom of God is *justice*. St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, describes the Kingdom of God as the peace, joy, and justice of the Holy Spirit. Justice is an integral element of the reign of God. James, in his epistle today, also has strong words about justice to those who have made themselves rich on the backs of the poor, the weak, the uneducated and the marginalized: “Their gains will rot and eat their flesh like fire.” It is obvious that God, in Jesus, always takes the side of the poor, and that they must be treated justly and fairly.

When I visited the Oblates in Rome, there was on the table in their lounge, chocolate bars labeled “Fair Trade”. There is also “Fair Trade” coffee that can be purchased. The Fair Trade movement is an attempt by Church organizations to provide marketing structures that will ensure that the poor producers in developing countries will get a fair return for their labor, so that they can grow crops that will sustain them as well as be sold for profit. In this way they can be more independent instead of being forced to grow specialty crops for multi-national companies that take advantage of weak regulations and vulnerable labor in poor countries. The Kingdom of God is all about justice for the poor and needy of the world.

A last insight into the nature of the Kingdom of God is that it is all about *shared authority and leadership*. Moses in the Old Testament reading was quite open to sharing his authority and power of the Spirit with seventy other elders whom God would fill with his Spirit.

When I was ministering in the Battlefords with three sisters of the Presentation of Mary, we agreed to work as a team and share leadership and authority. Our coordinator was one of the sisters and not me simply because I was the priest on the team. That was a challenge to many people who assumed that the priest should be in charge.

As archbishop of our diocese, I have chosen to share leadership. Our leadership team consists of a priest chancellor/vicar, a sister in charge of spiritual affairs, a lay woman as financial administrator, and me as the bishop. As much as possible, we try to make decisions by consensus, thus modeling team ministry for our diocese. Our work is made more effective by a very competent executive secretary. In this way, we are doing what we can to further the Kingdom of God in our diocese.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is a sharing in the Word of God who gave up power and authority to become one of us, even to the point of dying for us on the Cross. Our sharing in this celebration of his love is to make a commitment to strive for unity in Him, to work for justice, and to share power and authority with one another. Above all, we must let nothing come between us and the Kingdom of God.

So, remember, seek first the Kingdom of God, and all else will fall into place.