

Homily – 3<sup>rd</sup> p.a. (C) 2019

“This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week we enjoyed hearing the account from John’s Gospel of Jesus’ miracle at the wedding feast at Cana. This week, we change Gospels to that of Luke, with whom we shall stay on the Ordinary Sundays of this liturgical year. I said last week that the exceptional use of John’s gospel on that day was for the purpose of stressing the theme of manifestation, so dear to John, and so much a part of the recent feast of the Epiphany – ‘manifestation’ being the appearance among us of God himself. This week the theme is recalled as Jesus announces his ‘mission statement’. He takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads a passage announcing the liberation that God’s coming will bring to his people. The hint of eschatology which was implied in the symbolism of wine last week – wine representing the abundance of the blessings that God would bestow on his people – is strengthened this week by Jesus’ appropriation of the text from Isaiah. With me, he seems to be saying, the end-time, is ushered in, the good times are coming.

*He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.*

This talk of a new dispensation, a new Kingdom around Jesus Christ, has caused scholars and ordinary folk perplexity over the years. It is clear that the early Christians thought that the Jesus ‘event’ meant that God was about to wind up everything in one glorious consummation. C19th century scholars spent a lot of time in search of the so-called historical Jesus, pruning away at the scriptural record until they could get down to Jesus as he actually was, rather than as he was interpreted. The problem to this approach was that the pruners all succeeded in creating a Jesus that resembled what they wanted to find in him rather than revealing some pure core messianic identity. One of the principal things that they determined to throw out was the idea of Jesus as a eschatological preacher, announcing the coming to fulfilment of all God’s promises. Get rid of that, say that it was an optimistic invention of early Christians, and everything makes more sense. We are still here because Jesus never meant to say that the Kingdom was about to arrive. Well, sadly for those who had invested so much effort in it, this approach came to a dramatic end when Albert Schweitzer published two books in the first decade of the last century effectively putting a bomb under the whole enterprise. He made it clear that you cannot separate the historical Jesus from the Jesus encountered in the

accounts of the early Church, that the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one and the same. He also underlined the absolute centrality to Jesus' message and being of eschatology, of his talk of end-time and fulfilment. However far you whittle down the words of Jesus in the New Testament, you never get to a point where this apocalyptic message is absent.

Now, all this threw up again a fundamental question for the Church. If Jesus was announcing the arrival of the coming Kingdom, why are we all still here? Why is there still evil and suffering in the world? Well, theologians, and others, began to see that Jesus was announcing the coming of the Kingdom in his person, and that the Kingdom was breaking out wherever he was. The astonishing thing was that the Kingdom wasn't limited to the locality of his physical presence but was extended in the work of his disciples. Further on in Luke's Gospel, in chapter ten, Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples in pairs to proclaim the Kingdom. Listen to the exultation in the Lord's words as he greets their return.

*The seventy-two came back rejoicing. 'Lord,' they said 'even the devils submit to us when we use your name.' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Yes, I have given you power to tread underfoot serpents and scorpions and the whole strength of the enemy; nothing shall ever hurt you.*

And so we see a more true-to-life picture of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is where the Church is, where Jesus' followers are. This is our experience and, goodness, how very important that makes all of you! You are all priests of the Kingdom, bringers into being of God's blessings – if that sounds a little daunting, don't be afraid, we are all in this together, and not everyone is expected to have all the gifts that have been given to the Church. As Paul says:

*Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it.*

And he goes on to make the point that some are apostles, some prophets, some teachers, some miracle-workers, some healers, some helpers, some leaders, some linguists and so on, and so on: all are necessary and none has a monopoly of all the gifts. Together they were the body of Christ, and together we are the body of Christ.

You are the body of Christ. We often hear that, but don't often weigh the importance of it. It means simply, that when we are the Church together, we are the place where the Kingdom is found, where the kingdom is breaking out. The gifts that we experience in this community are not to be wondered at – they are the promises of God to his people fulfilled. Neither, alas, is it to be marvelled at when some churches go wrong, for the devil is the ardent adversary of the

Kingdom of God and strives to overthrow it. This is why the Church takes personal sin seriously and asks us to remain rooted in prayer, to practise self-examination and to make frequent use of the sacrament of confession. We have to get it right because it all depends on us – we are not the bearers of the whole burden of this great privilege, as Paul makes clear, but our part is essential as the Apostle explains by using the analogy of the body. If one part of the church is sick, then so is the whole. So – the good news is that we live in the intoxicating world of the Kingdom, we are the bearers, the vector, of that Kingdom. The bad news is that even our little part in making the Kingdom happen is essential. Don't hold back! God needs us on side. It won't happen here without us.