

Sunday, July 26th, 2020

Pentecost 8A

Genesis 29:15-30, Psalm 105:1-11, 45b, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

The Absurd Kingdom

Introduction

The kingdom of God is often a bit of a puzzle for people and that is hardly a surprise. In fact, through Christian history, it has taken on a range of appearances, an array of manifestations. In the early church, there were four main currents and since then these have recurred in different forms and configurations. These have been: the kingdom of God as God's rule that *appears at the end time*. This was the interpretation of the early church, living as it did as a minority at risk, among elites who invariably and viciously ruled in their own interests. The second, is the kingdom in the *spiritual-mystical sense, in the heart of the believer*. This was the emphasis of the Protestant Reformation, grounded in the idea of conversion. The third, is *the kingdom in the political sense*, associating it with particular political and social structures. This was given expression early in the peace, through the Christian Empire of Constantine in the east and the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne in the west. The fourth, is the church model, the idea that the kingdom of God on earth is *located in the Christian Church*. This was grounded in Augustine and is a view very close to the heart of conservative Catholicism.

All of these typologies carry aspects of truth to them, but...all of them function at a common or shared level, as heroic movements *writ large*. But this is not how Matthew or indeed the New Testament see it. From a biblical perspective, the kingdom of God always carries an idea of the people of God as meek, modest, unassuming with something of the absurd, the ludicrous, the illogical, about them.

Let's begin though, with the movie *Silence* as a way into the Gospel reading for today.

Silence

What a *tour de force* of the Director, Martin Scorsese. Beginning with the words "1633 Pax Christi, praised be God"; the film continues "All our progress has ended in new persecution, new repression, new suffering". Set within the Japanese Edo period where Catholicism was illegal and Buddhism the imposing state religion, we discover that many Japanese Christian converts have been executed. In this scenario, the Portuguese Jesuit, Fr. Cristóvão Ferreira, apostatizes, denies Christ, in order to stop the killing of the Japanese Christians, associated with him. Appalled at this news, two young fervent, zealous Jesuits, Frs. Francisco Garupe and Sebastião Rodrigues, go in search of him to establish the truth, or otherwise, of Ferreira's denial of Jesus. Garupe dies, refusing to apostatize, but Rodrigues surprisingly takes the path of his former mentor, denying Jesus, so as to save the Japanese. Much has been written about this movie since its release in 2016, but what stands out in it, I think, is the way in which Ferreira's and Rodrigues' unexpected, incongruous denials, pave the way for future Christianity and Christians in Japan. With the express permission of Jesus, Rodrigues – this formerly confident, combative, pugnacious Jesuit – accepts that the very action he never thought he would do for loyalty to Christ, he does, for loyalty to Christ. To live out the kingdom, to follow Jesus, leads us along strange complex, contradictory paths.

Matthew

And so to Matthew! In our reading, the first two images: the kingdom as a mustard or pine seed, and the kingdom as yeast, attest to how God works in human history, in the world. The mustard seed is so small, so unimpressive, so inconsequential, utterly absurd in the grand scheme of things. And the leaven is even more bizarre; and this for two reasons. First its minute dimension – just a small amount in 22 kilos of flour. But more significantly, yeast was seen in the ancient east as a corrupting agent as it led to fermentation. In other words, yeast itself carries an ambiguity about it. The question to be asked then on the back of this fact is: who is yeast, in the sense of God's legitimate agent, and who is not? Matthew's intentional use of this ambiguous agent for change, raises the same question among his community, that he raised earlier about who among you is the wheat and who are the weeds. Those of us who claim to follow Jesus are at times sources of corruption, while those who do not make such claims, may indeed be legitimate agents, genuine vehicles of the kingdom. And again, in the film, who is the yeast? Fr. Garupe, who refused to apostatize, or Frs. Ferreira and Rodrigues who did?

Both Matthew and Scorsese are suggesting to us, that God is at work in people, events, and situations, who and which we may well consider to be wide of the mark: who and which we may even interpret as subversive of the faith and the values we ourselves define so narrowly.

Spirituality...Real Spirituality

What then is spirituality, real spirituality about? Is it just about following the rules? Or is life so sufficiently complex, is living the kingdom so demanding, that black and white will not do? Can we trust that God works through a person's conscience, that God helps us to *discern* the right path in complex situations, where the normal rules seem inadequate to the reality of the situation?

One of the liberating things I think about the ascension of the Argentinian Jesuit, Jorge Mario Bergoglio to the papacy as Francis I, is that he understands that Christian faith is not just about rules, that Christian faith is not rule bound. That it is about discernment, seeking the way and at times coming to counter-intuitive *absurd* conclusions for the sake of Christ.

A Jesuit spiritual tradition may also be helpful here. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius there are three levels, or "degrees," of humility for the one who seeks out the will of God. The first level is when one does nothing morally wrong. In other words, one leads a good life. The second level is when a person who, when presented with the choice of riches or poverty, the possibility of honour or disgrace, is free to accept whatever God desires, not being "attached" to one state or the other. The third level of humility, the highest, is when a person is able to choose something dishonourable because it brings him or her closer to Christ. In the words of the Spiritual Exercises, "I desire to be regarded as a useless fool for Christ, who before me was regarded as such". A person accepts being misunderstood, perhaps by everyone, for Christ's sake, for the kingdom's sake. This is what Father Rodrigues chooses, confusing as it may be to Christian Europe of his day, to his Jesuit superiors – and even to modern-day filmgoers.