

March 9, 2003  
First Sunday in Lent  
David L. Edwards

### God's New World Order

Mark 1:9-15      *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

Our gospel reading this morning from Mark is very "busy." First, Jesus is baptized by John. Coming up out of the water, Jesus receives God's spirit, with a "voice from heaven" declaring, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It is that same voice that says to each of us, "You are my daughter, my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The life of faith is lived out of this solid foundation: God's unshakeable love for us, God's infinite delight in each of us.

Right away Jesus is "driven" by the same Spirit out into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Isn't this the way it always is? No sooner do we get some clarity about the reality of God's love for us, God's choosing us to be an instrument of that love, than we run right into some experience or person or inward doubt that shakes us up. Being God's Beloved is to be lived out in the world, where we will be tempted frequently to let go of it for something less.

The desert is that place, time, or experience in which faith seems to dry up and God seems far away. The people of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness. The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says, "God decided to spend forty years to teach [Israel] this one lesson," that human beings do not live by bread alone but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of God. [Three Mile an Hour God, p. 3] Wilderness temptation times are integral to the spiritual life, for they help us to deepen our complete trust in God's guidance and care. It can take forty days, forty years, a lifetime to learn that one most important lesson.

Jesus' baptism and testing are preparation for what happens next. Jesus comes out of the desert consumed with one single passion--the kingdom of God, the re-ordering of life so that it corresponds to the true nature of creation. God's new world order. We cannot focus on Christ without seeing that Christ points us beyond himself to the kingdom of God. That is what he proclaimed and called people to enter. When we enter into a relationship with Christ, we are on the path of the kingdom of God. We become persons and a community gripped by this vision of a wholly different and new ordering of life.

"Repent, and believe in the good news" of the kingdom of God, said Jesus. Repentance means our own transformation. *Metanoia* is the Greek word used here. Our word "repentance" doesn't do it justice. *Metanoia* is not about being full of guilt and

groveling on our knees before an angry God. The word is fuller, richer, and more positive than that. It literally means a complete change of mind, a radically new way of thinking, and a new, deeper understanding of reality. When our minds change, when our understanding deepens, our whole life follows. We begin to live in a new way. This “repentance” or transformation doesn’t happen just with one intense religious experience. *Metanoia* is the very nature of our journey of faith—a life-long process of becoming new people, a new community, and a new world by the grace and transforming power of God.

The translation the Greek word *basileia* as “kingdom” has unfortunate connotations. “Kingdom” conjures up images of domination and hierarchy. It brings to mind a ladder of power, from the lowest to the highest, the least important to the most important, the servants to the leaders. That is the exact opposite of what Jesus means by the *basileia of God*. God’s new world order is a radical, counter-culture reality that speaks against relationships of power and domination among persons, races, cultures, nations, and toward the earth itself. The *basileia* of God speaks against and offers the remedy for the ways we miss-inhabit the earth.

Diarmuid O’Murchu is a member of the Sacred Heart Missionaries, a social psychologist and counselor who lives and works in London with homeless men. In his book Reclaiming Spirituality, O’Murchu writes: “The Basileia is about radical transformation for authentic human and planetary life.” [p. 166] Elaine Marie Prevallet is a member of the Sisters of Loretto, and for twenty-two years was director of Knobs Haven Retreat Center at the Loretto Motherhouse in Kentucky. In her book In the Service of Life: Widening and Deepening Religious Commitment, Elaine states that our lives as people and communities of faith must be lived out in the context of planetary life. This is not just for the sake of our own and the planet’s survival, though that is urgent enough. Finding our place in planetary life is a matter of our own healing and completeness as the human creatures of God. In Jesus, she says, we find the full expression of this life and the way into it. “Jesus’ life,” she writes, “demonstrates precisely, in human behavior, the pattern of life of the whole earth community: ***everything lives only by sharing its life.***” [p. 20] Our understanding is deepening and widening(*metanoia*)today, that all of life is interrelated and interdependent in the fabric of creation. This new understanding, this change of mind, heart, and relationships, can open up for us a whole new way of living, so that we take our proper, humble, and joyous place within the whole web of life. This is the *basileia* of God.

We can glimpse the kingdom of God all around us and in us. The ancient Celtic Christians had a term for it: “thin places.” A “thin place” is a person, place, moment, in which one encounters the depths of life, where the eternal and the temporal come so close together that the sacredness of life is fully known. I think this is what Jesus meant. The kingdom of God is not some far off time or place. The kingdom of God is not “heaven,” separate from this earth and this life, something we for which we wait, biding our time until death. The kingdom of God, says Jesus, “has come near.” In Luke’s gospel he says the kingdom of God is “within us.”(17:21) Jesus teaches us to pray: “Let your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

Let me share some glimpses of the kingdom of God, some “thin places.”

Last week, I received some sad news from Kaye. Mrs. Cynthia Ngadi had died in Durban, South Africa. Mother Cynthia, as she is known, when she was in her seventies, felt a call from God to leave her middle class South African lifestyle—still poor by our standards—and take in homeless children. She established the “Inqaba Yokucasha,” or “children’s shelter.” We visited Cynthia and her children while we were at the XIII International AIDS Conference in Durban, the summer of 2000. We spent the afternoon talking with Cynthia and walking through the small cluster of old but clean buildings. The children were gathered in age groups to sing for us. And I will never forget their singing, which brought me to tears so many times. I was completely overcome as the high school age children sang. I remembered that in South Africa, half of the children under fifteen will not live into adulthood because of HIV/AIDS. In the midst of abandonment, poverty, and the devastation of AIDS, these young people, embraced by the warm and generous arms of Mother Cynthia, and therefore by God, sang with energy and confidence the words, “We are the children of God!” This was a thin place, where the kingdom of God had broken through and was established.

I took a walk last Tuesday afternoon with Bill Long, Jean Clements, and Ann Johnson on the trails here. Bill wanted to check for tree damage that might need to be cleared before for this summer’s sessions of Camp Kum Ba Yah. As we walked quietly and gently, the welcomed warmth of the sun filtering down upon us through the trees, I became so aware of the sacredness of this place. Here are thirty-some acres of woodland, protected and preserved, yet available for people of all ages to reconnect with and rejoice in the creation. Here is the camp and all that it means for the children and for the young people and adults who give themselves so that life may be enhanced and increased. Here is the Lodge of the Fisherman, providing a safe, comfortable, and healing place for people to meet together. On Monday and Saturday evenings, I can hardly find a place to park when I return home. The Lodge is full of persons helping one another in the struggle with addictions. Here is this community of faith, focusing its life on the inward journey of *metanoia*, of spiritual transformation, and the outward journey of living the life of the *basileia* of God, striving to live within its own fellowship the love of Christ. Here is a thin place, where we can learn and participate in the truth of the kingdom of God—*everything lives only by sharing its life*.

Jesus talked more about the kingdom of God than anything else. The kingdom of God is mentioned more than one hundred times in the Gospels. Teachings. Parables. Signs. The kingdom is found by reaching out to and being in communion with those who are poor, broken, suffering. One of the most radical things Jesus taught was that the kingdom belongs to children. Children had little or no status in Jesus’ day. We could argue that things have not changed much since then. Children are “thin places,” those in whom we encounter the sacred essence of life, the clear presence of God and God’s *basileia*. Staying close to children is essential to our own spiritual lives, for they can lead us into the kingdom of God

Two weeks before I left Indiana, the children of the congregation threw a goodbye party for Kaye and me. They had made up a play, complete with masks and hats they had

made themselves. We never quite got what the play was about, but it was wonderful and filled us with joy. We sang and ate cookies together around tables. I heard more “knock-knock” and “why did the chicken cross the road” jokes than I can ever remember. The children made cards for us from supplies laid out on a table. Katie, a truly loving and delightful child, came up to Kaye and handed her the card she had made. It was a folded letter-sized white paper, with her name on the bottom. Pasted onto it, right in the middle, was a tiny diamond shaped piece of paper, brightly colored. It was a strangely beautiful point of color and brightness that aroused wonder. “Here,” said Katie, “this is for you. It is the kingdom of God.” Children can give us the kingdom because it is theirs to give.

Our life as a community of faith has these two dimensions: the inward journey of our own *metanoia*, being transformed and entering the new life of the kingdom of God, and the outward journey of the *basileia* of God, what happens through us as we follow Christ and his call. The thin places where the kingdom of God is known and breaks through are all around us and in us, just waiting to be discovered and lived.