

HOMILY SUNDAY 26 – B (Homily 02)

“Holiness and Justice – Keys to the Kingdom”

(Num 11:16-17, 25-29; Psalm 19; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48)

“It is better for you to enter the kingdom with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.”

Personal holiness and social justice are key elements of the Kingdom of God.

At first glance, there is a potpourri of ideas in the readings today that all have to do with following Jesus and living in the Kingdom of God. Thoughts such as inclusivity, mature faith, security in that faith, openness to others, avoiding sin and using one’s wealth to help others all crowd together in these readings.

Prayerful reflection on these readings, however, surfaces two main ingredients: personal holiness and social justice, as key elements to following Jesus and living in His Kingdom.

Midway through the gospel, after the comment that others healing in his name could not be against him, Jesus suddenly shifts the focus to personal holiness using shocking categorical statements in doing so. What are we to make of these statements to pluck out one’s eyes and cut off one’s hands if they lead us to sin?

May I suggest that here Jesus is using what is called Semitic hyperbole, or exaggeration common in his culture, to make a point. Another word for this would be the language of love, strong language designed to motivate those one cares about to take positive action for their own benefit. An example of this might be a mother telling her child that she told her a million times not to do something. Both know that the number one million isn’t true, but designed to get the message across to the child that behaving in a certain way is important.

So for Jesus, personal holiness and being free from sin is of crucial importance, as there can be no sin in the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God, after all, is of paramount importance to him and to those who would be his followers. Life with Jesus is all about entering and living within his

reign, his Kingdom, sharing the very life of God with the Father and the Spirit. That is what he wants for us, and what he prizes most highly. No wonder he would use strong language in encouraging us to live his way, a life of personal holiness. It's worth a kingdom, his kingdom.

So the prerequisite for following Jesus and living in his Kingdom is personal holiness. Then what surrounds that teaching in the readings is a focus on fairness and justice, or how one must live within that kingdom and as his followers. The first point, in both the first reading and the gospel, is to be inclusive and open to others who are different than us. There is to be tolerance and respect for others who may be doing things in a different way. As long as the motivation is to care, to heal, to build up the kingdom, then there is room for variety.

There is biblical support here for what we would call ecumenism as dialogue with other denominations and collaboration in ministry. That was taken seriously by the Second Vatican Council and by especially some dioceses such as the diocese of Saskatoon which started a Center for Ecumenism that has recently celebrated its 40th anniversary.

The reading from James adds a strong teaching about social justice. For James, the wealthy must use their gifts and their wealth to care for and help out those less fortunate than they are. There is nothing wrong with having wealth. What really bothers James is that the wealthy of his time were selfish and uncaring, taking advantage of the poor rather than striving to share their wealth and help the poor.

These words of St. James are more than applicable to our times. We have only to think of such recent financial scams such as Enron, Conrad Black and Heinrich von Schreiber, not to mention the fraud schemes of Bernard Madoff, Earle Jones and others who out of selfishness and greed have bilked thousands of people out of their hard earned money, including the retired and pensioners. This is what James would rail about were he alive today.

A friend of mine who runs a surveying company is a good example of someone who lives the readings of today through personal holiness and a life of justice and loving service. He is a convert to Catholicism and strives to follow the teachings of the Church as best he can, along with a strong life of personal prayer.

He not only serves on many boards *pro bonum*, but he also treats his employers so justly and fairly that he has rarely had to dismiss anyone from the company, nor even to replace anyone up to the time of the recession, as the company has experienced almost constant growth and stability. One of the policies he has is to never refuse an employee permission to take time off for family celebrations. The reason for this is that he was refused permission by his boss, who later died of a heart attack, to attend my ordination as a priest in 1974. We both made sure that he was present at my Episcopal ordination August 29th, 2005 in The Pas and both of us remembered this part of his life.

In summary, the readings today speak about following Jesus into the Kingdom of God, through personal holiness and lives of service and justice.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is not only an experience of God's love making us holy, redeemed and forgiven, but also a strong mandate to live out the Eucharist through just actions and loving service to others.

So may our celebration today as followers of Jesus strengthen our personal holiness and deepen our commitment to live in the Kingdom through acts of justice and lives of loving service.