Homily for 11th Sunday, 2015
June 14, 2015
Readings: Ez. 17:22-24, Ps. 92, 2 Cor. 5:6-10, Mk. 4:26-34
Places: 4pm @ Stella, and 10am @ NU
Theme: The nature and experience of the Kingdom of God
Mood: Educational and joyful

Today's gospel refers to the kingdom of God. God’s kingdom in heaven differs greatly from the kingdom of humankind on earth. Compare the headlines of the daily newspaper, which speaks of power, war, and wealth; with the main message of the gospel, which speaks of forgiveness, self-sacrificing and salvation.

In Jesus’ times, I suspect that the chroniclers were lauding the emperor for the safety and stability of the Pax Romana, the comfortable living standards enjoyed by the citizens at Rome, and the glory of Caesar Augustus who recently had raised himself to the status of a god. Of course, the Roman achievements had come at a great price. The Roman army had brutally crushed any rebels who dared to oppose it. The Roman government heavily taxed the conquered tribes of North Africa and the Middle East in order to feed and keep comfortable the citizenry of Rome. And anybody who proclaimed himself king, especially the king of heaven, had to be confronted and eliminated. That was “kingdom” in Jesus’ day.

Some people delighted in the kingdom, namely, Romans and those who benefited from the system. Slaves did not like it. Oppressed neighbors did not like it. Gentiles did not like because these people suffered from the Roman kingdom. In view of that fact, St. John, St. Paul and other New Testament writers rarely used the term “kingdom.” The Jews and Jesus, however, liked the term ‘kingdom” and used it oftentimes. For the Jews and Jesus, “Kingdom” reminded them of their thousand year tradition since the time when David and Solomon were kings. And the Jews were waiting/hoping for a restoration of their kingdom through an apocalyptic intervention by Yahweh. Subsequently, the Old Testament and the three Synoptic gospels used the word “kingdom” many thousands of times, whereas St. John and St. Paul rarely used the term.

Jesus understood the word “kingdom” in a specific Jewish context, but added a new Christian understanding of “kingdom.” Jesus’ kingdom began with repentance of sin. It would grow by doing God’s will. It would grow mysteriously like a mustard seed. Citizens of Jesus’ kingdom were to live their daily lives by praising God and caring for all people, especially the poor, sick, widows, and those in greatest need. Who would enter this kingdom? Those who became like little children. Those who were re-born into Jesus’ Spirit and life. Those who had been last in the worldly kingdoms. Repentant sinners, including tax collectors and prostitutes. Those who sold all they had, gave it to the poor and followed Jesus. Those who daily would take up their cross and follow Jesus. The eight beatitudes list the recipients of the kingdom as the poor in spirit, the peace-makers, the merciful, and those who suffered persecution for righteousness’ sake. This kingdom on earth as it is in heaven was not to be some moral ideal, but a lived reality. St. Paul describes the kingdom as the experience of righteousness, peace and joy.” (Rom. 14:17)
Jesus founded both the kingdom and the Church. The Church is to serve as leaven for the kingdom. The Church is to assist and further develop the kingdom. The Church will pass away at the end of time, when Jesus arrives for Judgment Day. The kingdom of God, which Jesus founded on earth, continues in heaven, and will be completed in heaven. Meanwhile, we believers pray and work for the growth of the Kingdom.

Regarding the kingdom, we believers experience a major dilemma. We have one foot in the secular kingdom of man’s making, and the other foot in the kingdom of God. On a daily basis, we easily can be conflicted, challenged, torn in two directions. These two kingdoms are not to form a dichotomy. We Catholics and Christians are to live in the world, but not of it.

How might we successfully deal with this tension? May I suggest that we might try to be as clear as possible about our identity, our ultimate desires, and our development of good habits to keep us on the straight and narrow path that leads us where we want to go. When we stray from that path, we repent, confess and renew our commitment to follow Jesus’ way in the Church so that we and others will experience and enjoy the kingdom of God on earth and in heaven. Pray and work. As St. Augustine advises us, “Pray as though everything depends on God. Work as though everything depends on you.”

Right now, what gives you in your daily life the experience of the Kingdom of God? ... May I suggest these things: being good and doing good for others, attending Sunday Mass, hearing God’s word and receiving his sacrament. Praying quietly at home, in bed in the morning or in your backyard in the evening. Observing the power and beauty of nature: the rain falling, the wind blowing, the warmth of the sunshine, the flight of birds. Most of all, watching an infant, a toddler, a teenager growing gradually. Do you have a prayer place in your home: a special chair, a quiet place, a certain time of day? Whatever brings you closer to God is something that I would suggest that you pursue. Name it and pursue it. God intends that we might experience the kingdom of God on earth, and that we experience its fulfillment in heaven.