During the last few weeks, many people have asked me, “What in the world is going wrong? They mention various trouble-spots internationally and nationally. And if truth be told, even in our personal lives, many people suffer with various issues. To this context of international and individual events, I want to comment on today’s gospel, and make practical application to our daily lives.

We’ve been reading, in Cycle A of the Church’s three year cycle of Sunday readings, from St. Matthew’s gospel for the last sixteen weeks of Ordinary Time. One of Matthew’s main themes is the Kingdom of God. Early in Matthew’s gospel, John the Baptist proclaims, “Reform your lives. The reign of God is at hand.” (Mt. 3.2) Soon after that, Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Mount in which he promises possession of the reign of God to the following people: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the reign of God is theirs. ... Blessed are those who are persecuted for holiness’ sake, the reign of God is theirs.” (5.3,10) The next few chapters report Jesus’ miracles which demonstrate the power Jesus possesses to establish the kingdom of God. In last Sunday’s gospel, we heard Jesus’ parable of the Sower and the Seed, whereby some seed falls on a footpath, or rocky ground, or among thorns or on good soil; which causes the seeds either to fail or flourish, and to produce fruit a hundredfold, or sixtyfold or thirtyfold. This week, Jesus describes the growth of the kingdom of God by the use of metaphors: some seeds grow in the midst of weeds yet yield a great harvest, and the tiny mustard seed surprisingly sprouts into a large plant, and the kingdom of God is like leaven/yeast that makes flour grow into wonderfully baked goods.

The vitality of the kingdom of God on earth is intended to reflect the vitality of the kingdom of God already existing in heaven. Jesus teaches us to pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The kingdom of God is here and not-yet-here. It is here on earth because Jesus has established it, but it is not yet completed on earth or heaven, which only will happen at the end-times.

The Church’s role in relation to the kingdom of God on earth is to serve as leaven for the kingdom. The Church is not to last forever. The Church simply serves on earth as leaven for the kingdom of God, which does last forever. We Church-members live in the world, and develop the kingdom of God in the world by following God’s will.

Discovering the content of God’s will is difficult for all of us, beyond the Great Commandment, “love God and your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 12.30-31), Ten Commandments, Eight Beatitudes and the seven Precepts of the Church. E.g., is it God’s will that you marry? ... Is it God’s will that you marry person a, b, or c? ... Is it God’s will that you marry this person and live in Lewiston, NY or in Lewiston, Maine? ... The more specifically we attempt to identify God’s will,
the less clear it is that it is God's will. Should I have become a priest? Yes, I'm 99% sure of that. Is it God's will that I become a Vincentian priest instead of a diocesan priest? That is less clear. Is it God’s will that I spend most of my priesthood in education rather than in the foreign missions? That is least clear.

One more example. I know a young couple, already blessed with a four year old girl, and recently gave birth to a baby boy. The thriving three-week old baby boy suddenly died from SIDS. Was that God’s will? ... God is All-good; God cannot actively will evil; that is philosophically impossible. God, however, can passively let evil happen either by natural causes or by our misuse of free will. When evil happens to us by external factors or because of our own bad choices, what then is God’s will? God wills that we face that reality and deal as best as possible with it; don't deny reality. Second, feel the pain of this reality; the evil that happens in our lives breaks our hearts; it confuses us, and discombobulates us. Third, identify with Jesus in his experience of evil which happened to him from disbelievers. Identify with the Blessed Virgin Mary to whom is attributed the Old Testament words, “whose sorrow is like unto my sorrow?” (Lam. 1.12) And the fourth and capstone step is to transcend the evil and suffering which occurs in our lives by reaching out and doing good for others.

Now, for a practical application. St. Paul describes the kingdom of God as “a kingdom of justice, peace and joy.” (Rom. 14.17) That kingdom exists as fully as possible in heaven, but imperfectly on earth. How are Christians supposed to remain joyful in the midst of the confusion, crises, and chaos that occur in our world and in our private lives?

Joy may be described as the emotional response to the experience of harmony. Being “at one” with God, and trying to live our Catholic life as best as possible enables us to live with much joy. Much of life we cannot control like the weather, and how people are going to behave towards us. Before God, we try our best. We pray for world leaders and rebels that they might act according to God's will, word, and ways. We pray that we might live well in our limited parts of the world. We not only pray but also we take effective action.

Last month we celebrated the combined feast of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More. In 1534, they refused to accept King Henry VIII’s demand that they recognize Henry and not the pope as head of the church in England. For 13 months, the king kept and tortured these two men in the Tower of London. They remained peaceful and joyful. Finally, the king sentenced them to death by beheading. When the executioner was about to cut off Thomas More’s head, Thomas at the last second raised his hand, stopped the executioner and joked, “Please don't cut my hair when you cut my neck. My hair has done nothing wrong to offend the king.” All the saints kept perspective. They prayed constantly for all people, including those with whom they disagreed, and for those who were persecuting them. So, in the midst of much turmoil today, let's keep perspective: we pray for everybody, we pray that God's will be done as difficult as that is to ascertain, we pray for those in greatest need, we take effective action insofaras we are able, we pray the famous Serenity Prayer, and we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy
name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Prayer and effective action enable us to be joyful in the midst of whatever is going wrong in the world.