Homily for 34th Sunday 2014
Solemn Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe
Nov. 22-23, 2014
Place: St. Peter’s, Lewiston @ 4pm, and Stella @ 10am
Readings: Ex. 34.11-17, Ps. 23, 1 Cor. 15.20-28, Mt. 25.31-46
Theme: When do we experience a glimpse of heaven on earth?

The Universal calendar of the Catholic Church has 16 solemn feasts. One pertains to the Trinity, i.e., Trinity Sunday; one, to the Holy Spirit, i.e., Pentecost Sunday, six pertain to Jesus Christ, four to Mary, four to particular saints. Not all solemnities are holy days, but all holy days are solemnities. Today, we celebrate the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

Today, we celebrate the solemn feast of Jesus, King of the Universe. Jews in Jesus’ time were expecting a political king, and not the kingship that Jesus intended. Many people called Jesus a king, but he never chose that title for himself. The wisemen asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews that we go and worship him?” (Mt. 2.2) The apostles James and John asked Jesus for special places in his kingdom (Mt. 20.20) On the first Palm Sunday, Jerusalemites hailed Jesus as king (Jn. 12.13) At Jesus’ crucifixion, the Roman soldiers dressed Jesus in a royal purple robe, placed on his head a crown of thorns, and mocked him, laughing, “All hail, the king of the Jews.” (Mt. 27.29) Pontius Pilate ordered that a sign be attached to the cross, identifying the victim as, “Jesus Christ, king of the Jews.” Notice that Jesus never applies to himself the title of king. He did not refuse the title, e.g., when Pilate asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus responded, “You say that I am a king.” Jesus never calls himself king, maybe because the people and he had different understandings of that title. (Jn. 18.37)

Two thousand years later, our contemporary understanding of “kingdom” still does not communicate well Jesus’ teaching on “kingdom.” In today’s parlance, “kingdom” implies a geographical region inhabited by certain peoples and languages, living under a single leader’s political rule. Scripture scholars prefer that instead of our speaking about the “kingdom of God” that we would use the phrase “reign of God.” The “reign of God” implies a spiritual realm, not limited to particular places and peoples but open to everyone. The “reign of God” consists of a divine presence that is intangible, grace-filled, and powerful. This powerful presence provides a vision and an attitude that necessarily expresses itself in action. So while we Christians will continue to use the Scriptural phrase, “kingdom of God,” we wish to broaden our concept to that of the spiritual “reign of God.”

In the gospels, John the Baptist introduces the kingdom of God: “Repent. The kingdom of God is at hand.” Jesus describes metaphorically the kingdom’s marvelous growth: 1) the kingdom will grow like a mustard seed, starting off very small and blooming into a very large bush, 2) the reign of God is like a fisherman’s net which catches a huge draught of fishes, some of which the fisherman keeps and others which he tosses back into the sea; and 3) the kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price, for which the wise person sells everything else he possesses in order to purchase this pearl because it is more valuable than everything else. (Mt. 13. 31-32, 44-48)
Jesus teaches us to pray for the coming of the kingdom: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And Jesus tells us to work for the kingdom. Certain criteria exist, and “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 19.24) The criteria are very simple: “when I was hungry, did you give me to eat; when I was naked, did you clothe me; when I was sick or in prison, did you visit me?” (Mt. 25. 31-46) Who will be in heaven? Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount promises, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the reign of God is theirs.” (Mt. 5.3) Also, “blessed are those persecuted for holiness’ sake, the reign of God is theirs.” (Mt. 5.10)

Jesus founded on earth both the Church and the kingdom. The Church serves as leaven for the kingdom, providing the heart and soul of the kingdom. The church exists only on earth; it will pass away at the end of time. The kingdom of God on earth is in the process of becoming what Jesus intended, but the mission is not completed. The Kingdom of God is here, but it is not completely here. The kingdom of God will be completed in heaven. We Church members have been “born again” in Jesus Christ through our baptism, and we have been confirmed in our faith. We possess, therefore, the Christian vocation to profess and publicize our belief in Jesus and the Church that he founded, to develop the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven; to be good and to do good, and to reject the works of Satan, who leads the kingdom of evil. Jesus declares that our personal and public priority is to, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all other things will be given you besides.” (Mt. 6.33)

Applying this reign of God to our lives, we might ask, “what gives us a glimpse of heaven on earth? ... What experiences give us a foretaste of Jesus’ eternal peace and joy? ... What experiences connect us on earth to the kingdom of God in heaven? ... Thank God for these occasions. One Saturday last month, I celebrated a funeral in the morning, a baptism at noontime, and a wedding in the late afternoon. These celebrations of the major moments of life, namely, birth, marriage and death, enabled the participants to experience God’s grace in profound ways. 1) They thanked God for the gift of life and the people in our lives. 2) They rejoiced and wept at depths which our words usually don’t feel, and certainly cannot explain or express adequately. 3) They pondered the meaning of life which God gives us. These major moments of life touch our being with a kind and quality of joy and peace which the world cannot give but which only Christ gives. ... For you, what experiences provide a foretaste of heaven? What experiences fortify you on earth until you die and rise to heaven? What connects you to the spiritual kingdom of God? These are special graces. These moments give us a glimpse of heaven on earth, i.e., a transitory experience of the reign of God, and a personal encounter with Christ our king.