

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Jer 23:1-6

Ps 22:1-6

Eph 2:13-18

Mark 6:30-34

There are many ways one could approach our readings today, but I'd like to frame my remarks as "A Tale of Two Kingdoms" – the kingdoms of the world and the Kingdom of God.

Every Mass we pray the *Our Father* as Jesus taught us to, and as part of that great prayer we say, "Thy Kingdom come." Perhaps you've never thought about what's implied in this request. If this new Kingdom that Jesus spoke of is indeed to come, then it follows that our old kingdoms have to give way. To truly live the new life that Jesus came to offer, the old securities to which we are all inclined to cling have to go. In a sound-bite, to say "Thy Kingdom come" is to imply "my kingdoms go".

Let's turn to the readings. If you recall, at the time of the Judges the Israelites asked for a king so that they "could be like other nations." This is always a bad sign! Samuel tries to warn them how terribly the monarchy would pan out (1 Sam 8), but the people are insistent, and in the end they get their king. With the exception of the great king David, Israel's monarchs pretty much fit Samuel's prediction, being self-centred and self-serving. At the time of the prophet Jeremiah in our first reading, they've seen a rogue's gallery of bad kings come and go, and the situation has become critical. In response, Jeremiah offers a "Jeremiad" – a full-throated attack on the kings of Israel, the bad shepherds. Implied in this is also a critique of the people of Israel, who still seeks comfort and security in what the kings of the world can provide.

Yet Jeremiah follows these harsh words with a most wonderful promise: one day, the Lord himself will come and govern his people Israel, leading them home and bringing them to good pasture. This doesn't mean that God would become of the mayor of every town in Israel – it means that one day the Lord will show the nation how to live first and foremost according to his most wonderful will. And so the key question becomes, how does the nation live? What is its orientation? Does it seek the security of worldly kings, or does it live according to God's purposes? This leads us into our Gospel passage...

In our short excerpt from St Mark's Gospel we hear how the disciples have just returned from their first missionary journey. If you recall from last week, they had no travel bag, no money—none of the comforts and securities of the world. Instead, they had to abandon themselves in utter trust of the Lord. And what did they proclaim everywhere they went? The Kingdom of God. Thy Kingdom come. My kingdom go.

So the disciples have returned from this first great experiment of complete trust in God, and they are bubbling over with excitement, keen to share all the wonderful things that happened.

And Jesus does something quite lovely – he invites them to rest a while. The disciples are in the honeymoon phase, excited at this new way of life they have discovered and probably ready to charge back out again – but Jesus calms them down and says, “rest a while”. He knows that their young faith is still too weak to absorb all that the world will throw at them. They have had their first great success in proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and now it is time to step back, take stock, and get ready for the more difficult lessons to come – in short, they have to get ready for the Cross.

However, going on retreat is never that simple for Jesus. He is mobbed by the vast crowds—by the same Israel that had thrown its lot in with bad king after bad king in Jeremiah’s time—and Jesus’ heart is filled with pity, because they are like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus’ heart is filled with pity because he himself is the one whom Jeremiah foretold. He is not just another wise teacher – Jesus is God himself, come down to shepherd his people Israel.

And what does Jesus do for the crowds? He doesn’t give them what kings normally offer – military protection, economic stability, etc. Rather, St Mark says that “he set himself to teach them at some length.” At the heart of Jesus kingship is the vision of a new life. If you want to see what this looks like, check out the *Sermon on the Mount*:

- Love your enemies
- Turn the other cheek
- Lend without expecting return
- Don’t worry about tomorrow

What he’s teaching the people is: “Let go of the securities to which you cling. Let go of the things that you think you will find happiness in, and learn to trust.”

Now this doesn’t mean that we never have to go to the store, or that we never have to worry about buying clothes – that’s not the point. The point is: we can’t rest in those things, we can’t find our security and comfort in them, but we must rather find it through trusting in the Lord. That is the lesson of the new King. This is the clearing of a new spiritual space; this is a new ordering of things – what Jesus called “the Kingdom of God.”

What the people longed for from ancient times—security, peace, comfort—would not come through worldly kings (as the Old Testament makes so abundantly clear). It would come only through obedience to the word of the Word made flesh. It would come from trusting Jesus, the shepherd of his people Israel.

And so it is worth asking ourselves: where do we find our comfort? Where do we find our security? Which king do *we* follow?