

Healing, Preaching and Teaching Toward the Inner Kingdom

Adapted from a homily given on July 26, 2020,

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost.

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The Gospel reading prompting today's reflections is from the ninth chapter of St. Matthew:

When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you." And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, "See that no one knows it." But when they had departed, they spread the news about Him in all that country. As they went out, behold, they brought to Him a man, mute and demon-possessed. And when the demon was cast out, the mute spoke. And the multitudes marveled, saying, "It was never seen like this in Israel!" But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons." Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. (Mt 9:27-35)

The final sentence of this passage describes three aspects of Christ's ministry on earth: *teaching* in their synagogues, *preaching* the gospel of the kingdom, and *healing* every sickness and every disease among the people. Teaching, preaching, and healing. Let us reflect on these themes in reverse order.

Healing

We have had a sequence of Sunday readings from the Gospel of Matthew describing the healings of our Lord. In today's Gospel Jesus healed two blind men as well as a man unable to speak. Last Sunday Jesus healed a paralytic (Mt 9:1-8). Two Sundays ago he healed the two Gadarene demoniacs (Mt 8:28-9:1). And the week prior to that he healed the centurion's servant (Mt 8:5-13). Our Lord came into this world healing people. Two questions arise. First, why did Jesus perform so many healings? And secondly, why are healings comparatively infrequent after our Lord's ascension?

The healing aspect of Jesus' ministry is always directed first and foremost at revealing him to be the Messiah, the one for whom the Jews were longing, the one who would bring justice into a world of injustice, who would usher in the kingdom. This is clearly indicated through St. John the Forerunner's inquiry. When he was in prison he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Coming One or should they be looking for another (Lk 7:19). Jesus replied, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are

cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Lk 7:22). He didn’t say with words, “I’m the Messiah,” but he pointed them to his actions as the fulfillment of the prophecies describing what the Messiah would do in establishing his kingdom on earth. Our Lord’s point is quite clearly that his healings testify to who he is, the Messiah.

While healings have continued in the life of the Church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the lives of the Saints in the centuries since the time of Christ’s advent, they have never been as frequent as during his ministry. The importance of the difference between the nearly ubiquitous healings of Jesus and the limited role of healings in the life of the Church is given by the Apostle Paul. For St. Paul himself wanted to be healed of a physical ailment, and he entreated God three times to deliver him from this thorn in his flesh. But God replied by indicating that his ailment was for his salvation; it was how he was to learn *the* profound truth of Christian living: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” While St. Paul prayed to be healed of his physical suffering even as the many suffering people of the Gospels were healed, he responded to God’s “no” by humbly saying, “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor 12:7-12)

So, on the one hand, Jesus’ healings testify that he is the Messiah, the one who is coming to bring justice to an unjust world. On the other hand, in the life of the Church, the trials of physical suffering are often the very schoolroom in which God teaches us the most transformative truths in the most existentially tangible ways. These simple and important answers to our two questions, however, created a tension for Jesus’ fellow Jews as well as for us some two millenia later. For the people of Israel were asking the very same questions that we are: Where is the kingdom? Where is the justice? Where is conflict and oppression being supplanted by peace and compassion? Just what kingdom was Jesus preaching?

Preaching the Kingdom

St. John the Forerunner came preaching that the kingdom of heaven was near (Mt 3:2). Jesus himself preached with exactly the same words, that the kingdom of heaven was near (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15). And when Jesus sent the disciples out to preach, he told them to proclaim the very same message (Mt 10:7; Lk 10:9). But where is that kingdom? It seems that we have a Messiah without the anticipated kingdom. Today’s Gospel reading opens the door to resolving this dilemma.

When Jesus healed the two blind men he told them not to broadcast this to the multitudes: “And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, ‘See that no one knows it’” (Mt 9:30). Why? The first and most visible reason is that people, both then and now, have a deeply mistaken conception of the Messiah, of the kingdom he comes to establish, and of *how* that kingdom is to be established. At

the time of Jesus, the Jews were looking for an earthly king who would deliver them from their Roman occupation and govern the nation in such a way that would bring them peace and prosperity. Admittedly, these are desirable things, but they easily come into deep conflict with the kingdom that Jesus came to establish. When we are confident of the goodness of our ends, we are tempted to use any and every means to achieve them. Politicians, for example, often try to co-opt religion to achieve their vision of a just and prosperous society. Similarly, religious leaders often try to co-opt political structures to achieve their vision of a just and prosperous society. This is precisely what was happening to Jesus, and he would have nothing to do with it. Whenever word got out that Jesus was healing people, and the masses would flock around him, he would leave the area and go somewhere else so as not to let them make him an earthly king who accomplishes *their* vision of the kingdom--so as to prevent them from the sin of worshiping the wrong messiah, a messiah of their own making.

There is a more subtle and invisible second reason for why Jesus would instruct people not to broadcast his miracles: so that those restored to health would experience not only the physical benefits of healing, but also the spiritual benefits; that they would let the spiritual reality of Christ's work sink into their hearts. There is nothing so destructive to inner spiritual renewal as talkativeness. Thus Jesus teaches us that we will be judged for every idle word that proceeds from our mouth (Mt 12:36-37). A sobering thought! Why? Because it is so easy to say the right thing, to sound good and look good on the outside, while inwardly there is a spiritual vacuum. Our confident talk often masks spiritual emptiness. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also" (Mt 23:25-26). Jesus instructs those he heals to be silent so that the inside of the cup may become clean, so that they may experience a spiritual cleansing.

For most of us, our vision of a just world involves *others* changing. The kingdom is a place in which the world around me is set straight. I don't notice my own inner crookedness. But just as Jesus will have nothing to do with those intent on using him as a tool to accomplish their vision of a good world, so too will he have nothing to do with us who replace his vision of the kingdom with one of our own making--however good it sounds. The kingdom he preaches is *within* us (Lk 17:20-21). Where does the kingdom need to be established? Where does the king need to reign? Where does the crooked need to be set straight? Where does conflict need to give way to peace? In *our* hearts. His kingdom cleanses the inside of the cup. Its focus is on changing me, not on changing those around me.

This is a hard lesson to learn. The disciples, even after having spent forty days listening to the teachings of their resurrected Lord (Acts 1:3), ask this question as their final words before his ascension into heaven: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They are still looking for an earthly kingdom, where everything around them is set right. But

everything changes with Pentecost, the coming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. Their eyes are opened to the inner kingdom. And, indeed, the book of Acts records them as preaching the kingdom without the slightest hint of inciting political or social revolution, of promising a release from suffering in this world. Instead they preach that we must enter the kingdom of God *through many tribulations* (Acts 14:22). This is precisely the lesson that St. Paul was to learn by his thorn in the flesh so that he could then write to the Christians in Rome, “The kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). The kingdom is not freedom from physical suffering. It is the work of God in us transforming our inner character *through our suffering* from the passions of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:19-23).

Teaching

We have seen the role of healing in establishing for us the assurance that Jesus is the Messiah, the King coming to establish his kingdom, and we have seen that the kingdom that he--and after him the Church--is proclaiming is an *inner* kingdom, his gracious transformation of our lives from the inside out. Now we turn to the first of the three aspects of Jesus ministry outlined in today’s Gospel reading. Jesus’ teachings are a relentless invitation to let him cultivate his kingdom within us. The seed that is sown in the different types of soil is the Word of God that is sewn into our hearts, and our responsibility is to foster receptivity in our hearts even as fertile soil is receptive to seeds (Mt 13:1–23, Mk 4:1–20, Lk 8:4–15). Responding to his teaching spoken into our hearts is our way of cooperating with the establishment of his kingdom within us. He does not force or manipulate us, but only invites and instructs. And when we respond, his words become seeds of immense power, planted within us by our abiding in his words (Jn 8:31; 15:7), and we come to realize that *he himself* is that seed, *he* is that word, and *he* is coming to live in us.

In the simplest way, then, if we want to cooperate with Jesus the Messiah establishing his kingdom in our hearts, we would do well to read his teachings, by which I mean those places in the Gospels where his extended discourses are recorded. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the Parables of the Kingdom (Mt 13), the parables and teachings on culmination of this age and on the coming judgement (Mt 23-25), and nearly all of the Gospel of John, especially the upper room discourse (Jn 13-17). I’m *not* suggesting that these texts are more authoritative than the rest of the bible. What I’m saying is that just as we might focus our attention on praying the Psalms, or studying the Letters of St. Paul, or meditating on the practical wisdom of Proverbs, so too we will be guided in the ways of the true inner kingdom by taking time to focus our attention on Jesus’ teachings in his discourses.

If we take just a few moments a day to meditatively read his words, asking him to make them true in us, we will find ourselves on an inward journey to the kingdom he is proclaiming to us. We will find that his teachings are not difficult but rather impossible for us to live. We are not

able to turn the other cheek; to go the extra mile; to not become angry with others; to let our yes be yes and our no, no; to do good to those who harm us; to be free from anxiety; to pray, fast, and do good without drawing attention to ourselves; to not judge others. We find that we are not able to live the beatitudes. Our Lord's teachings are impossible for us. And it is for this reason that he says, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). The transformation of our lives must be produced by God (Jn 3:21). We need to experientially come to realize that the fruit of the Spirit is the fruit *of the Spirit*, produced in us by the Spirit, and not by our hard work. We are not called to become good people, but to let the Good One live in us; we simply cooperate with his transformation of our hearts. His teachings are precisely his invitations to work with him in the renovation of our hearts.

Conclusion

In this way, the kingdom of God is not a political or social movement, of which we have plenty of in our age even as there were in first-century Israel, which are designed to set things right according to *our* values, *our* sense of what is right, and by *our* efforts. Inevitably these cultural movements focus on telling others how they need to change for the world to be a better place. And the 'power' to make these changes is an external pressure--sometimes fear-mongering, sometimes shaming, sometimes the enticing promise of a utopia. Jesus was not willing to be co-opted by this approach to changing the world. This is not the kingdom of God.

Our Lord's healings reveal him as the Messiah who proclaims a heavenly kingdom which brings inner, spiritual healing, and he guides us on that inner journey by his teachings in order that we might be with him where he is. Let us release our earthly efforts to change others, to have the world around us transformed to suit our ideals, to use political and social means to establish a spiritual reality. And let us receive *his* healing, *his* preaching, and *his* teaching, as he leads us into *his* kingdom within us.