

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, January 22, 2017

The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on one or more of the scripture readings for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

AT HAND

Where is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Island? The answer to that question is found in the question itself. The United Kingdom is located in Great Britain, which includes England, Scotland and Wales, and in Northern Ireland.

So then, where is the kingdom of heaven? The answer to that question would seem to be equally obvious. The kingdom of heaven is in heaven. It's in the place where God reigns in glory and majesty with the angels and saints, and it is the place we hope to go when we are judged by God. As Jesus told us, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2)

Yet in this Sunday's Gospel (Matthew 4:12-23), Jesus seems to give a different location for the kingdom of heaven. He says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

We can understand "at hand" as meaning that the kingdom of heaven is soon to arrive. It's imminent, just as we might say that the month of February is at hand.

We can also understand the phrase "at hand" in another way. When we say something is "at hand" it can mean something is close by. For example, a dentist might tell her assistant that the instrument she is looking for is right at hand.

When Jesus says that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he seems to be saying that the kingdom of heaven is near us, just a moment away. It is not something far off in the distant future or in some far away dimension of space.

The kingdom of heaven is something that is present whenever we open ourselves to God and make God's will the determining factor in our decisions and in our way of living.

We can see what living that way means if we look at Jesus. He perfectly embodied the kingdom of heaven. In Jesus' compassion and mercy, in his care for the poor and powerless, in his opposition to sin, selfishness and evil, in his peace and joy, in his ability to forgive and to recognize connections with others, we see a life lived according to God's will.

To embrace such a way of life we need to repent. We need to turn away from the values promoted by a society that idolizes pleasure, power, wealth, material possessions, and the self.

If we do, the kingdom of heaven becomes present. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, "The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the kingdom of God is among you." Or as other translations put it, "The kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21)

Each time we look at our hands, we might remember that the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed is not off in the clouds, it is as near as our hands. For the kingdom comes when, like Jesus, we allow the will of God to direct our lives.

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