

Homily for April 16, 2021

What kind of a kingdom is this?

What kind of king will Jesus be? This is one of the key questions raised in John's Gospel. It is worth noting that John is the Gospel writer who includes this detail at the crucifixion:

Pilate also wrote a title and put it on the cross; it read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

John's Gospel is also the record where Jesus says to Pilate just before he is crucified.

"My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world."

These verses help us to better understand the last verse of today's Gospel:

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

As a result of the feeding of the 5000, the crowd now wanted to make Jesus into a "worldly king", the very kind of king Jesus said he was not to Pilate.

The irony is that while in John six the crowd wanted to force him to be a political and worldly king, by the time we get to chapter 19, another crowd does cooperate with Jesus in becoming another kind of king. The king that would reign from the Cross and a king who in John six offers up a meal not fit for an earthly but heavenly king.

The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels and therefore is of great importance. It tells us two significant things about the kingdom Jesus will rule. It is a kingdom of fulfillment and a kingdom of cooperation.

First of all let's think about how it is a kingdom of fulfillment. We are told that the boy has five loaves and two fish. The early Church writers understood these allegorically. The five loaves are the five books of the Torah, the two fish are the Prophets and Psalms, and the young boy is the Jewish people. When Jesus receives these OT Scriptures, he breaks open their deeper, spiritual meanings to refresh the multitudes.¹ Therefore the kingdom that Jesus comes to usher in had been in the plan and heart of God from the very beginning of the scriptural record. The whole of the Old Testament points to its fulfillment in Jesus. Added to this, the kingdoms of this world will be opposed to Jesus' kingdom but will never be able to undo the plans and purposes of God. That is why Pilate's title:

'Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum' meaning 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'

is so important. He meant it as a taunt but St. John uses it as irony. Without knowing it Pilate, who asked the question earlier in John: “What is truth” is now telling the truth. Jesus is the King of the Jews, their long-awaited Messiah – even though they rejected him.

Jesus is also a kingdom of Cooperation. The wonder of God is that he chooses to ask for our cooperation to achieve his purposes. Here he takes five barley loaves, which by the way were the bread of the poor – barley was often fed to animals, and two fish, no bigger than sardines. With them he multiplies such meagre offerings to feed those present on that grassy plain.

Such is the nature of Jesus’ kingdom. A kingdom of fulfillment and cooperation.

How are we to respond to Jesus’ kingdom? The answer is found in verse 11 of today’s Gospel:

Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated;

“Given thanks” renders the Greek verb eucharisteō, from which the English word “Eucharist” is derived. The miracle of the loaves thus foreshadows the institution of this sacrament at the Last Supper. Whenever we gather at this meal, we are participating in a meal fit for a heavenly king and subjects of a heavenly kingdom.

We give thanks for how we now participate in this kingdom where from the Cross Jesus fulfilled the purposes of God foretold in the Old Testament. And like that boy you and I get to cooperate in the further unfolding of Jesus’ kingdom today, as we offer ourselves and this bread and wine to increase Jesus’ loving reign that is unstoppable. We can see how astute and prophetic Gamaliel was when he said to the Council:

So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!