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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
January 24, 2021 Streaming Mass
3rd Sunday of Year B Mark 1:14-20

Some people look to religion to provide them with “the answer” to the riddles, the mysteries of life. I suggest that it may be just the opposite: that it is more “questions,” or better “questions,” rather than answers, that religion provides us with. So, the question we can pose to ourselves is “What does Jesus ask of us; what does Jesus require of us?” Some might respond that Jesus asks us to believe in Him; others might say that Jesus asks us to worship him. But in reading today's Gospel, it seems that above all else, Jesus asks us to follow Him, to walk in His footsteps, to do the kinds of things He did, to try to be the kind of person He showed Himself to be, because believing in Jesus and worshiping him, as praiseworthy as those things may appear to be, may not be enough.

“Believing” in Jesus can simply be an idea we entertain in our heads with no consequences for everyday life, and in just worshiping Jesus, there is always the danger that Jesus may be simultaneously honored and ignored. We can revere Him as a remote, a majestic figure, with all sorts of rituals and ceremonies, without really listening to what He has to say to us. And in doing that, we have effectively marginalized Jesus from our lives, we have sidelined Him without appearing to have dishonored Him in any way. We can pay “metaphysical compliments” to Jesus by calling Him “consubstantial with the Father” in the Creed. To which I can imagine Jesus responding, “Well, thank you very much, but when was the last time that you fed the hungry, or gave drink to the thirsty, or clothed the naked?” As today's Gospel makes clear, it is to follow Him that is the first thing Jesus asks of us. Believing in Him, worshiping Him, are all part of the package, but they come after setting our sights upon walking the path He has walked before us. So, the question is “where do we follow; where are we headed?”

The core of Jesus' message is summed up in today's first chapter of St. Mark's Gospel, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the Gospel.” “This is the time of fulfillment,” something is happening that never happened before. Something is breaking into human history that was spoken of, that was hoped for by all the prophets of Israel, but that has never been seen before. The kingdom of God is breaking into human history—the future, what will be, is happening now. And what precisely is the “kingdom of God?” The kingdom of God is not a place like the United Kingdom. Is not an institution, nor some religious organization like the church. Nor is it where we hope to go when we die, a place where God dwells—it is not

heaven either. The kingdom of God is wherever, whenever and however God's benevolent will is at work. It is evident in those places and on those occasions when compassion takes the place of indifference, when forgiveness takes the place of revenge, when acceptance of others takes the place of judgmentalism, when reconciliation takes the place of recrimination, when cooperation takes the place of competition, when making peace takes the place of waging war.

Jesus, in His words and His actions, offers us a glimpse of that Kingdom—of what it means to live in such a way that God's benevolent will is at the center of all that is going on within us and around us. Jesus gives us a glimpse of the future, the future that is in God's hands, the future that we believe will someday come in a more complete fashion, the future that is happening now. We live under the reign, the rule of God, we enter into the Kingdom of God to the extent that we are open to that possibility; to the extent that we are allowing the future to happen now. It is because, as St. Paul says in today's second reading, "the world in its present form is passing away." To believe in that as a reality is what Christian faith is all about.

This is the gospel, the good news, we are invited to accept as the real truth about life. We are invited to believe that the future is in God's hands, that good will triumph over evil, love over hate. And then we are drawn by the promise of the future, believing it is God's future, rather than pulled down by the cynicism and lethargy of the past. We are called to be the change we say we believe in.

Jesus says "Repent." When we hear those words we may think of some guy wearing a sandwich signboard screaming in Times Square. Repentance is something more basic than to stop doing the bad stuff we have been doing. Repentance is a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of consciousness, a change of focus, and consequently a change of priorities. After Simon and Andrew, James and John hear the words of Jesus, they leave their stuff behind them, and they give a new direction, a new orientation to their lives—they follow Jesus. And that is what we are invited to do as well—to see the world as Jesus saw it—to make the vision of reality that Jesus gives us the pivot, the foundation of our lives.

But the truth of the matter is that we may be living that religious vision in a manner that is more partial than complete. Sometimes faith can become like a hobby we pick up, something we practice from time to time, when the occasion permits, but something we never get really good at, because we never give it the full attention it requires. Or, faith may show itself in the same way as does a person who belongs to a club. We pay our dues, we go when it fits into our schedule, our kids learn what the other kids at the club learn there--not swimming lessons or tennis, but First

Communion and Confirmation. We eat in the dining room (Sunday mass) routinely, and then we may join another club if we don't like the staff, the decor, the entertainment. Again, a commitment that is partial, rather than complete.

Christians are those who have opted to live in the real world, the world God has made and is making, rather than in a world of illusion, a world of distraction. C.S. Lewis provides us with this metaphor. Consider for a moment how a parent calms a little child when he/she is upset, when that baby is crying. They dangle some shiny object in front of the baby to grab his/her attention, to distract the infant from what is disturbing him/her. As adults, we do the very same thing, although the objects we look to distract us from our anxieties are fashioned on a much grander scale. Again, the choice, do we prefer to live in a world of distraction, of illusion, or the real world. Am I willing to "repent"—to change my focus, to change the direction I have been looking in, walking in, and accept the vision of life Jesus offers, as being the one that is authentic and genuinely life-serving.

There is an old English prayer that was incorporated into the musical, "Godspell," that might serve us well this morning. It goes this way, "Oh dear Lord three things I pray—to know Thee more clearly, to love Thee more dearly, and to follow Thee more nearly." Let that be our prayer as well.