

From The Pastor

How do you understand the Kingdom of God and its breaking forth in the Church and in the world? How might the Kingdom of God be present in your life, making its presence felt through you?

These are reasonably abstract questions that most of us would find difficult to answer directly. They are none-the-less real questions that have real answers; or should have. I suppose another way to frame the question is to ask about our image and understanding of God. What is your image of God? How do you perceive or imagine God to be? Is God near or far away? Is God warm and loving, generous and kind, healing and forgiving? Or is God all-knowing and all loving, but distant, ever concerned about our sins and most often disappointed with our failures?

Our image of God will have a great deal to do with how we pray and express ourselves to God. It will determine our basic stance of trust or mistrust before God. Much of the time, our image of God remains unconscious to us, but it directly and consistently influences the rhythms and moods of our faith and prayer. In this way, our image of God will influence our idea of what the Kingdom of God is, and how we perceive its presence in our lives.

Today's first reading is a prophesy of Isaiah. It comes at a time of exile when the people are feeling abandoned and rejected by God. Through his close and personal relationship with God, Isaiah perceives the tenderness of God toward the people. Through Isaiah, God speaks a tender, even intimate word of restoration, comfort, and impending abundance.

The imagery is decidedly feminine. As an attentive and concerned mother, God shows tenderness for the weariness and despair of the people. God is the mother who comforts her children as she nourishes them with her milk, and cuddles them on her lap. This is a real and true image of God. Isaiah speaks this image to a people weary with discouragement and abandonment to awaken them to the presence of God in their midst. It is an image of the Kingdom of God in that the Kingdom of God is something God is doing on our behalf, that we are invited to receive and share in. We cannot bring about the Kingdom of or by ourselves. We can only say yes to the Kingdom of God, as we perceive it in our lives, now through Jesus.

Some will find this image of God as feminine to be very warm and inviting. Others will find it uncomfortable and resist its blessing. Yet, why would we resist the truth and reality of God's loving care. Do we allow God to comfort us with divine love, or is this beyond our experience? Again, we are directed to our image of God, and our expectation of who we think God is and how God should act.

Part of our resistance to so personal an image of God is perhaps our discomfort with the closeness of love. In faith, we all profess that God loves us. We say with conviction that we know God's love and we trust his mercy and depend on God's help. Yet, for the sake of a question, when did you last feel, affectively, the comfort and sweetness of God's love? When you felt this blessing, how did you imagine it? Was God distantly caring for you through a feeling? Was it brought on by an answered prayer, or rescue from a time of concern? Could this comfort of God ever be described as a warm, sweet embrace with the confident surety of God immediate nearness?

Ours is not a God of distance, but One who is active and present in our lives in immediate and personal ways. Today's gospel immediately follows what we read last Sunday. The theme is the same; we are called to be active disciples of Jesus in bringing about the Kingdom of God. Jesus sends out many disciples to make known the love and goodness of God and that the divine way is near at hand. How is the Kingdom near at hand? It is through the immediate presence of God in his disciples and followers.

Who are these disciples and followers of Jesus? They are those who have come to know and believe in the presence of love in real and immediate ways. To deeply know love is to become loving. Love begets love. A person deeply loved will bear the fruit of love. The early disciples knew and took in the love of Jesus, so they could speak and act in that love in witness to others. Love is an urgent call in the Kingdom of God. Some will readily and gratefully embrace it. For others, it will be too much to believe or take in, so they will resist and reject it. Jesus says, if they will not receive the love of the Kingdom you offer, don't waste your time. Retain your inner peace, shake the dust from your feet, and go to another place and try again.

In the human reality, the love of God is too good to be true. Not only because of the narrow way we have been taught to think of God and how God should act, but also because we resist the vulnerability of a love that becomes too real or intimate. This is the Kingdom of God and the life of Jesus. For most, Jesus was too much truth; too much love. For those who could accept it, Jesus was the love of God for the world, and freed their lives in love and joy. Our God is a fabulous lover in both masculine and feminine ways. Like any real lover, God will do whatever it takes to draw the beloved to the divine self. The beloved only has to accept and receive what is offered.

Father John Esper