

## **Your kingdom come**

Isaiah 58:1-9

February 9, 2014

All too often we are simply not on the same page -- us and God. You think?

But I am not now thinking primarily of “us” in the general sense, of humanity as a whole going its own merry way, in spite of God or even to spite God. I am thinking of “us” here, people who take our faith seriously, people who take God seriously. All too often we are simply not on the same page -- us and God.

We want consolation. We want God to help us and comfort us and strengthen us and protect us and provide for us.

We want God to accept us, to approve of us, and so we do our best to earn God’s approval, by our worship, by our prayer, by our giving, by our living.

We want hope. We want to believe that in the midst of the difficulties and struggles of this life, God has a plan for us and a plan for this world. We want to believe that God has a future for us and for this world, a future we can count on.

We want to be saved. When all is sorted out, when the sheep are divided from the goats, we want to be on the right side. We want to be on God’s side. We want to be with God, close to God, loved by God, and so we do whatever we can do to make sure of it. We want consolation, personal consolation.

And what does God want? The same things. The very same things! God wants for us strength and comfort and blessing, hope and confidence and intimacy. God wants us to be saved. God wants us to be loved.

But if God wants the same things for us that we want for ourselves, then why do I say that we are not on the same page? Because all these things -- love, approval, salvation, blessing, protection, assurance -- all these things God gives to us freely, gives to us freely in Christ, because of Christ. We do not have to win any of them. The things we want, God gives to us, but then ... but then, there is something God wants from us.

And what is it that God does want from us? The kind of worship God wants, the kind of fasting God wants, the kind of life God wants, is this:

*Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes*

*to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives.*

God wants us to meet the needs of those among us who are needy, and to set them free from the forces that made them needy in the first place. God wants us to serve the poor and change the world. Simple enough!

Pope Francis titles the fourth chapter of his *Evangelii Gaudium*, “the gospel of joy,” ... he titles it, “The Social Dimensions of Evangelization,” writing:

*The kerygma has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others ...*

It's not just about me and God, about you and God, about her and God. It's about what we do with each other. It's about what we do for each other. It's about who and what we are together. The gospel is about the kingdom of God. Let me share again with you the quote from Francis that I put on the front page of this week's Tidings:

*Reading the Scriptures also makes it clear that the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. Nor should our loving response to God be seen simply as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of “charity à la carte,” or a series of acts aimed solely at easing our conscience. The Gospel is about the kingdom of God; it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity. Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society. We are seeking God's kingdom ...*

The gospel is about the kingdom of God: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth ...”

The setting for God's kingdom is? Earth. And what do you think things will be like when God's will is done on earth? What will things be like in God's kingdom? Will there be hungry people in God's kingdom? Will there be homeless people in God's kingdom? Will there be people with tattered clothes in God's kingdom? Will there be help-less people, people with no one to help them, in God's kingdom?

This is God's agenda for God's people, for us. The gospel is about making the kingdom of God present, not just about personal consolation. It's about what we do with each other. It's about what we do for each other. And how do we fulfill this agenda? How do we make the kingdom of God present? Isaiah points the way.

We fulfill God's agenda, we make the kingdom of God present, through acts of charity, by providing to any and all who need them the basic necessities of life: food and shelter and clothing and human kindness, because human kindness is a basic necessity of life! But listen again.

*Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor ... Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives.*

Share your food. Open your home. Give your clothes. Help your relatives. It's personal. Making the kingdom of God present is about sharing your self, what you have and who you are. It's about more than stocking a food pantry, or donating to the Salvation Army, or dropping off clothing to Goodwill.

The kingdom of God is about relationship, about you and me and ... the other. You remember that Francis said that we proclaim the gospel by practicing the "art of accompaniment," by "removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other." But which "others?" Ed? Anthony? Jennifer? Terry? Others like them who come to our church for help?

What is needed above all, Francis says, is ...

*... an attentiveness which considers the other 'in a certain sense as one with ourselves.' [We think of the other as one with ourselves!] He continues: This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good ... True love is always contemplative, and permits us to serve the other not out of necessity or vanity, but rather because he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances.*

Making the kingdom of God present is about charity, but not about charity as we usually think of it, not about benefactors on the one side and recipients of assistance on the other, but about one community united by mutual caring and mutual help. Francis talks about "solidarity," which "presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few."

It's about we, not about "us" and "them." It's not about "How are they doing and what can we do to help?" but about "How are we doing and what can we do together to make life better for all of us?"

Thinking about charity in this way clearly has broader economic implications. Francis says that ...

*We must never forget that the planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity.*

And he reminds us elsewhere that our word, “economy,” is rooted in the Greek word οικονομία, which refers to the management of a household. Economics is not fundamentally about producing or increasing wealth, but about managing a household. It’s about about managing this common household, this earth and all its people.

Making the kingdom of God present has broad social implications, impacting the way we think about the nature of community. It has broad economic implications, impacting the way we think about and plan and structure our economies. And it has broad political implications.

We fulfill God’s agenda, we make the kingdom of God present, through acts of charity and through political action. “Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free!” God wants us to do more than provide the necessities of life to those who need them. God wants us to overturn a status quo that puts them in need in the first place.

And how are we going to do that? Either through politics or war, and I don’t think God intends his people to go to war! Accordingly, Francis urges God’s people to work “to eliminate the structural causes of poverty,” reminding us that ...

*As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world’s problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills.*

He adds:

*We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth in justice requires more than economic growth, while presupposing such growth: it requires decisions, programmes, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality.*

This is ambitious. This is complex. This will be contentious. And this will surely leave the church “bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets.” But this is how we make the kingdom of God present. This is what God wants.

Are we on the same page? Us and God?

I want to tell you a secret, a secret I make good use of in my own work as a minister. The best way I know of to proclaim a message that is compelling and personal and to the point is to preach to my own sins, and that is exactly what I’m doing, right now.

My faith has always been very personal, focussed on who I am and how I am in the presence of God. I want very much to please God and I try to do that by living a life that is humble and kind and genuine and gracious and generous.

And I do want to please God too by changing the world, by making the kingdom of God present, here and now. I want to, but I don’t always know how to, and I don’t always make the social dimensions of the gospel -- the gospel in the streets, in the neighborhoods, in the town halls, in the election booths, in my own personal day-to-day relationships with the people who cross my path -- I don’t always make that nuts and bolts incarnation of the gospel a priority, either in my ministry or in my own life as a follower of Jesus.

I need you to help me. We need to help each other. How can we make that change in mindset from thinking of ourselves as dispensers of charity to thinking of ourselves as people in solidarity with the poor? From thinking of others as objects of our pity to thinking of others as “one with ourselves?”

How can we together share our food? Share our home? Share our clothing? Share our selves? How can we together do something to remove the yoke of injustice from around other people’s necks? How can we live what we pray: “Through our lives and by our prayers, your kingdom come? “