

Lectio Divina: A Prayerful Reading of Sacred Scripture

Sunday of the Word of God Gospel for 2024

Mark 1:14-20

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

It is no accident that Jesus preaches repentance and the kingdom of God in the same breath. For it is the possibility of entering the kingdom of God that moves us to repent from sin. The prospective joy of that heavenly city gives us strength to wrest our hearts away from what offends the Lord. As Saint Jerome explains: “He who would have the kernel breaks the shell; the sweetness of the apple makes up for the bitterness of the root; the hope of gain makes pleasant the perils of the sea; the expectation of health mitigates the pain of the treatment. So he who desires the joy of a holy conscience swallows the bitterness of the penance like a pill.” Repent! our king cries out. The gates of the kingdom of God do not stand barred against us; Christ flings them wide open. Rather, our own hearts bar us from entering—our love for what we cannot have; our desire to stand apart from God and his kingdom; our attachments to what is beneath us. Jesus asks that we give these up. And for a remedy he offers us the Gospel—he offers himself—to help us detach ourselves from sin and do penance. He offers his love so that we might love him. If we would turn to him, he avails himself and sets his power, his grace, and his love at work within our hearts. Developing this idea, Saint Caesarius of Arles teaches: “The kingdom of heaven is Christ.... We must recognize the greatness of God’s love for us; so generous is it that he is willing to be appeased by the amends we make for our evil deeds. And though his judgments are always just, he gives us a warning before he passes them. It is not for nothing that our God draws floods of tears from us; he does so to incite us to recover by penance and a change of heart what we had previously let slip through carelessness. Yet no matter how many wounds our human nature has sustained, we are never justified in giving ourselves over to despair, for the Lord is magnanimous enough to pour out his compassion abundantly on all who need it.” We need not look within ourselves and see only sin, which would lead us to despair. Instead, Jesus invites us to look within and see someone God loves: someone he created, someone he redeemed, someone to whom he offers the grace to overcome pride and selfishness. We are powerless to repent on our own. Without the Lord’s working within us, there is no chance we will overcome ourselves. Yet we take refuge in the Lord’s abiding love for us—in his power to purify us and draw us into his kingdom.

As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them,

“Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.

These future shepherds of the Church are the first to recognize that the kingdom of God is at hand. They are the first to repent and believe in the Gospel. But Christ called them to more, and he asked them to give up more. Upon accepting his office as Peter’s successor, Saint John Paul II reflected on this apostle’s obedience to Jesus’ call: “Perhaps the fisherman of Galilee did not want to come here (to Rome). Perhaps he would have preferred to stay there, on the shores of the Lake of Gennesaret, with his boat and his nets. But guided by the Lord, obedient to his inspiration, he came here.” Not only were Simon Peter and Andrew to renounce their sin. Hearing Jesus’ call was enough for them to lay down all that they were doing—their whole way of life and source of income—to begin an entirely new way of life. As Saint Remigius depicts: “For by the net of holy preaching they drew fish, that is, men, from the depths of the sea, that is, of infidelity, to the light of faith. Wonderful indeed is this fishing! For fish, when they are caught, soon after die; when men are caught by the word of preaching, they rather are made alive.” Jesus asked Peter and Andrew to give up everything, but what he gave them far surpasses their former way of life. When Jesus breaks into our life, he calls us not only to turn away from sin or to stop offending him—he wants us to love him. The Lord calls us to live for more than ourselves, but for him who died for us (cf. Gal 2:19-20).

He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

They left their father. Christ’s call is complete. No one claims our love and devotion as God does; no one can. Our bonds of earth—to family, friends, or our communities—never equal in strength our bond with the Lord. He created us. All that we are and everything that we have depend on him from moment to moment. No parent can claim this but our Father in heaven, who created us from nothing. No earthly friend can claim this but the one who redeemed us and called us friends (Jn 15:15). No child can claim this but the Son of God, who for our salvation became the Son of Man. No government can claim this but the kingdom of God, in which alone will be true justice, peace, and the joy that never ends.

Lord Jesus, give us grace to renounce what offends you so that we may follow you unreservedly and live forever in your kingdom.