

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

[*1Kings* 3: 5-12; *Psalms* 119; *Romans* 8: 28-30; *Matthew* 13: 44-52]

Over the last few months, we have grown quite accustomed to seeing a variety of floor markings in our buildings, indicators that were not there prior to the pandemic. There are two in particular on which I would like to focus this morning, in order to draw out the teaching that is given to us in today's passages from Sacred Scripture. These are the indicators showing us where to stand, and arrows that point out the direction of movement.

I'll begin with those round floor markings that depict the soles of shoes. "Please stand here." The reason for the marker is clear: by standing in the spot indicated, we assure physical distancing from other people to protect against the coronavirus, that disease so dangerous to the health of our bodies. In the parables used by Jesus in the passage from St. Matthew's Gospel, our Lord is telling us "where to stand," and the reason here is also clear: when we stand as Jesus would have us do, we become distanced from those things that are a threat to both body and soul, namely, every way of thinking and pattern of behaviour that carry the disease of infidelity to God.

These parables draw our attention to what is called the kingdom of heaven. This is central to all that our Lord taught and did. In fact, the very reason Jesus came to earth was to summon all of humanity to place their lives under the reign of God and no longer under the dominion of sin. To put it in other words, Jesus came to tell us where we must stand. That stance is to be squarely under the reign of God. To stand in this place is to make a definitive decision that God alone will be sovereign in our lives, that all will be surrendered to His will. Think of how Jesus taught us to pray: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." The two are inseparable. The kingdom of heaven comes into our lives as we stand under God's reign and strive with His help to make our every thought and deed accord with His holy will.

Jesus tells us that the discovery of this kingdom, the rule of God, is like finding an immense treasure in a field or a pearl of great price. It is something unsurpassed in value. Those who find it are like a farmer who sells everything to buy the field or a merchant who does likewise to acquire the pearl. Jesus is teaching here that discovery of the kingdom elicits a response of great joy and total commitment. This is what we mean by conversion, the joyful discarding of all that is discovered to be worthless in the light of this extraordinary treasure.

All of this begs the question: what makes this kingdom of heaven so precious? Why is it that standing under the reign of God is unsurpassable in both beauty and goodness? Much can be said about this, of course, but an important part of the answer is given when we consider the two other texts from Scripture. There we learn that by standing under the reign of God, we discover the meaning of our lives, which receive in consequence the direction they seek.

This brings me to the arrows. When we go into a grocery store, for example, directional arrows are everywhere. Those who understand the store's layout have designed a flow of movement for shoppers to follow, and indicate this by the arrows. Aisles are now one-way. Now, I must admit that by times I have struggled mightily with the temptation to go against the direction indicated, especially when I can see in the next aisle, just a few feet away, that can of soup I want,

but I'm supposed to go down another aisle first and then come all the way back the next one in order to get it.

When we stand under the reign of God, we learn the direction that he has set out for us in Jesus Christ. As St. Paul describes it in the passage we heard from *Romans*, that direction is one-way, toward eternal life. God, he tells us, calls us to glory. God knows the layout of all that he has designed, and so is the One who directs the flow, as it were, the One makes all things work together for those who stand under his love, as the Apostle puts it. He knows the direction we are to take and indicates that in His Son, Jesus. Yet, we all struggle with the temptation to follow a direction of our own making, to pursue our won will and desires. Sadly, surrender to this temptation is on full display in our world today, and we see firsthand, perhaps we are experiencing firsthand, the extraordinary harm that this causes in people's lives.

We would do well to learn from the example of King Solomon. We heard from the passage taken from the *First Book of Kings*, that, at the beginning of his kingship, Solomon got it right. Faced with the daunting prospect of governing a vast number of people with a multiplicity of needs, he admitted before God that he didn't know what he was doing or where to go. "I do not know how to go out or to come in," he said. He knew who was really in charge, that he needed to stand under the rule of God and therefore have God provide him with direction. Following the Lord's lead gave rise to a period of great peace. What happened later, though, was that Solomon began to trust in himself and set his own direction, which in turn brought great destruction upon not only himself but also the people.

Eventually, floor markings telling us where to stand and the direction to follow will be removed. The teaching of our Lord, however, will not. It is perennially valid. Only when we stand under the reign of God, and are distanced from all that is contrary to the Gospel, will we find true and lasting joy. Only when we take our stand as disciples of Jesus Christ will we discover the real meaning and clear direction of our lives. There is nothing more precious than that!

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
St. Joseph's Basilica
July 26 2020