

Epiphany 3
January 22, 2012
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Well let's see - The 49'ers or the Giants? Or Baltimore or New England? Sports on Sunday? Isn't that irreligious?

Here's a true history: In the third and fourth centuries, especially in Germanic areas, it became customary for men to disarm themselves before entering into the sanctuary for worship. The bulk of these weapons were simple wooden clubs--not elegant, but effective as protection against highway bandits and wild animals. It became quite common for the back of the church to fill up with a pile of the wooden clubs during services.

Human beings being what we are, it didn't take long before some bright spark suggested a game. After services the men would collect all these clubs, pile them together and compete among each other to see who could knock down the most clubs as possible by rolling stones at them. The more clubs knocked over, the more sins the individual was believed to have left behind.

Eventually this contest became more intentional and more organized, ultimately developing into "nine pins"--a bowling game where the pins were set up in a rectangle – 3 ranks of 3 pins. Knocking down sins turned into a much anticipated pastime on Sunday afternoons. By the time of the Reformation, bowling nine-pins had grown well beyond the church's "parking lot" to become a hugely popular betting game at taverns and inns. It was Martin Luther's favorite sport, and he is often credited with being the one to standardize the game of bowling with "nine pins." Luther loved the symbolism of Christians not as holy rollers but – wait for it! – as "holy bowlers!" Here they were enthusiastically bowling over all the sins that kept them from seeking God's fullness and fulfillment. In coming to America one pin was added and the rectangle became a triangle and hence you have the holy sport of "Ten Pin Bowling"!

Who knew you came to church today to hear about ten-pin bowling!!

So every time you bowl (or hear about it) now you have to ask yourself "What wrong actions and attitudes do I need to remove that are keeping me from what God is calling me to do?" Repent, believe, and bowl!

And now, you might notice, we have arrived at today's gospel! What does Jesus say? "Repent, and believe in the good news".

"The Good News about what?" is the logical question. "The kingdom of God has come near". The Kingdom of God. What's that? We hear lots of language about "kingdom" in Christian faith – the word "kingdom" is a translation, of course. The actual Greek phrase was "Basileia tou Theou", and the 2nd and 3rd words "tou Theou" are easily translated: "of God". But "Basileia" is tricky! From it's Hebrew roots the idea is of sovereignty, or dominion, or reign, but "kingdom" seems to have been the favored word.

The problem is that "kingdom" doesn't capture the distinct and edgy political overtones of

“Basileia”. That’s probably because last official King we know of here was George the Third of England! So if Kingdom has “edgy political overtones” then they’re 18th Century edgy political overtones! Today most Kingdoms we know of are rather benign!

So what about the 1st Century context? We know that phrases and words used in early Christianity were chosen because they offered a stark contrast between the faith of our ancestors and the society of the day. When the first Christians called Jesus “God’s Son” and “Savior” and described him as “the child who will lead us” they were taking titles that were applied to Caesar Augustus as a way of saying “Jesus is God’s son and Caesar isn’t; Jesus is the savior of the world and Caesar isn’t”.

The same is very likely true of “Basileia tou Theou”. What great society that dominated the Mediterranean world – the known world – would Christians want to contrast against? The Empire of Rome! Judaism and, later Christianity, stood in opposition to all earthly empires – in fact Jesus’ reply to Caiaphas’ question “are you the Messiah” in Mark 14 “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power”, and “coming with the clouds of heaven” “are quotes from the Old Testament – their context there was that when the Son of Man would be seen sitting at the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven all earthly empires would at that moment pass away – it’s probably what finally got him crucified.

So the most accurate contextual translation of “Basileia tou Theou” is “the Empire of God”.

In today’s gospel Jesus is quoted as saying that “The Empire of God is at hand” – it’s entirely reasonable to ask, therefore: what does that empire look like, what are the characteristics that marked – and mark – it out as a contrast to the prevailing culture?

Two first century things jump right out:

Firstly, Jesus opposed the purity laws – it was these laws that, because they separated Israel from the Nations, gave Judaism its identity.

And, Secondly, Jesus opposed the institution of the Temple – the other great symbol of Judaism’s identity and purity - a symbol for which Israel’s heroes had died.

Little wonder that Jesus was opposed so strongly. It would be akin to burning the stars and stripes.....

Jesus didn’t challenge institutional Judaism and Jewish identity for no reason. It was because he believed that the true Empire of God should concentrate on what lay at the center of Jewish religious identity. Remember the question the “Good Scribe” (akin to the “Good Samaritan”) asked him? “Teacher, what are the greatest commandments?”

..... “You shall.....love. Love the Lord your God, love your neighbor, love yourself”. That’s right out of the Prophets! Concentrating on that core of faith is way more important than the sacrificial system!

And how would anyone know when that empire of love has begun to come? What are the signs? What do you see?” Jesus asked: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them”.

The Empire of God, the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God has begun! It isn't something to be located in a distant future, but something that has, by its very definition, already coming into being.

We live in that Empire, that kingdom, that reign, now. It is as it always was: characterized by love, and compassion, and, yes, joy.

How do we live into that Empire of God? That's a question whose answer takes more than a lifetime!

Amen.