

What is 'The Reign of God'?

Sisters and brothers, in today's Gospel we reflect on the 'Reign of God.' Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "Thy kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven."

"Thy kingdom, thy reign, come..." But what is 'The Reign of God'?

Father John Dear, priest and author, tells of an experience he had with a group of teenagers who were preparing for Confirmation, when he served in a very poor, rural parish in the mountains of northeastern New Mexico.

"I began a weekly study of the Gospel of Mark, where we read that opening chapter that Jesus announced that "the Reign of God is at hand." I asked the young people: "What is the reign of God?"

The high school juniors and seniors looked at one another as if to say, "What's his problem? Doesn't know what the Reign of God is?"

Finally one of them spoke up: "The Reign of God is life!"

He looked at the others and they all nodded in agreement: "The Reign of God is all around us, here in our village, in our day to day life"!

John Deere said: "I nearly fell out of my chair; in a million years I do not know if I ever could have thought of such a simple and profound answer..."

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Yes, sisters and brothers: The Reign of God is life!

The Reign of God is peace!

The Reign of God is love and compassion and kindness.

The Reign of God is our family, community.

...The reign of God is as close as our hand held up to our face...

The reign of God is Here!

I think Jesus would have liked the young person's answer. The one thing Jesus spoke about more than anything else, the main point of all his teaching, was The Reign of God. Jesus did not preach about himself or even about God. Rather he talked about this mysterious, beautiful image: "The Reign of God." Most translations refer to it as the "Kingdom of God," but many folks these days prefer a less patriarchal, more inclusive phrase, like the "Realm of God" or the "Kingdom of God." Martin Luther King, Jr. described it as "The Beloved Community."

What is “The Reign of God”? Our Gospel reading today says: “This is how it is with the Reign of God, it is as if a farmer were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise, night and day and through it all, the seed would sprout and grow: of its own accord and the land yield fruit”!

What is “The Reign of God”? ‘It is like a mustard seed, that when it is sown in the ground is the smallest of all seeds on the earth, but once it is sown, springs up, becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches so the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade...’

What is “The Reign of God”?

The Reign of God is that sacred space where we love unconditionally, where we dwell in peace, where we rejoice because we are in the presence of God, where we love and worship the living God with all our being!

What is “The Reign of God”? How would you describe it? Still a bit fuzzy? Hard to get our hands on?

Here’s another illustration:

One of my favorite movies is “Babette’s Feast,” a fable about a refugee woman who flees the French Revolution to a remote Danish village, where she becomes the cook for two pious elderly sisters. Once a great chef, in France – Babette ends up making soup for the two shut-ins of a country village.

One day, Babette learns that she has won the French Lottery, so she asks the two sisters if she can cook a special meal for them and the village friends. They hesitantly agree.

Babette then proceeds to spend all her winnings on the greatest feast she’s ever made using only the best, imported French gourmet foods, choice wines, imported vegetables and exotic ingredients arrive for the fabulous feast.

The devout Christian villagers, however, fear the worst; they have looked down on this foreigner from the day she arrived in village and they secretly pledge not to enjoy this ‘heathen’ meal, but to eat the food solely out of respect for proper manners.

The meal begins. and the diners stoically enjoy one delicacy after another. But over the courses that kept coming, ... old resentments are healed and feuding friends reconcile. Sharing true communion, the villagers taste the reign of God!

Sisters and brothers, when we gather around the table with family and friends and share our food and share our hearts, we are experiencing the *Reign of God*.

Reflecting on this story I can’t help but think of my mother’s famous spaghetti dinners... when friends and neighbors would join us and we’d spend the whole evening celebrating! We were experiencing the *Reign of God*.

If you’ve had a chance to join the Friends of Dorothy on the last Wednesday of the month, for Pasta dinner where folks gather from St. Lucy’s, St. Vincent’s, St. Andrews, All Saints and folks connected with ministries of peace and justice from throughout the greater community, you have experienced the *Reign of God*.

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Are we getting a better sense of what the Reign of God is all about?

The New York Times columnist David Brooks, in an April 11 Times article, wrote how in the course of our lives we all meet individuals who radiate an inner light; they make you feel respected and valued, they listen with concern and compassion and genuine care for others and the good of all, their very manner is infused with gratitude.

Brooks admits that while he has been blessed to know such folks. He has not yet achieved that depth of character.

He says that he has attained a pretty remarkable set of “resume” virtues with a decent level of career success; he falls short on the “eulogy” virtues that are talked about at our funeral... Were you kind, brave, honest, faithful? Were you capable of deep love?

He then goes on to make an interesting point:

“We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the resume ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate that sort of inner light. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character.

“But if you live for external achievement, years pass and the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured. You lack a moral vocabulary. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You figure as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody and people seem to like you, you must be O.K. But you live with an unconscious boredom, separated from the deepest meaning of life and the highest moral joys. . .

“Good people, Brooks writes, “are made, not born – that the people I admired achieved an unfakeable inner virtue, built slowly from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.”

And I would add, people who are experiencing and promoting the Reign of God, are those who see their resume virtues and all the hard work that went into them, as a means to ultimately make the lives of others – the lives of the world – a little bit better.

A final example of how the Reign of God is occurring right here in our own parish:

Five years ago, about five of our parishioners were reflecting on how a number of our parishioners, as well as friends and neighbors, had experienced the tragic loss of a child – born and unborn – and how painful the grieving process is that is never completely ended; and wouldn't it be great if we could create a Children's Garden on our campus in their memory, as well for all the children of the world: victims of war, poverty, and violence, trafficking... . To create a place of prayer and quiet reflection and healing. Today there are about 20 folks who would like to see that dream become a reality and who invite any parishioners who might be interested to an informational meeting this Wednesday at 7 PM in our Parish Center living-room... the mustard seed has been planted, we will see where it goes!

The reign of God is like a mustard seed – smallest of all the seeds the earth, but once it is sown...springs up and becomes the largest of plants!

Sisters and brothers, the bottom line is: Jesus Christ calls us here at All Saints, on this little spot of Holy Ground on the southeast side of Syracuse, to embrace the faith of the Gospel farmer and the hope of the mustard seed. To be willing to plant whatever “seeds” of Gospel hope and compassion that we possess, where-ever and whenever we can, in the certain knowledge that it will, in some way, result in the harvest of God’s life and love. Amen