

## 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Jan. 29, 2012)

I am **teaching a course** this year at St. Michael's College entitled "*Scripture in Christian Tradition*," It offers both an introduction to the Bible and an overview of the ways in which it has been understood over the centuries. This semester we are focusing on the **Gospel of Matthew** and on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

It is the first time that most of the students have read and tried to understand a **single gospel**. They tend to know isolated incidents from the life of Jesus as well as examples of his teaching but they have never thought of the gospels as distinct literary works, each with its own unique way of telling the story of Jesus.

The readings at our Sunday liturgy are based on a **three year cycle**, the most distinctive feature of which is the choice of the gospel readings. Each year the focus is on a different gospel, this year on Mark.

Written some 35 to 40 years after the death of Jesus, **Mark** is the earliest of the gospels. It is also the shortest. It seems to have provided the basic narrative outline of the public life of Jesus that was used by Matthew and Luke. What distinguishes their Gospels from that of Mark is above all the considerable amount of teaching of Jesus which they have and he doesn't.

In Mark the **emphasis is on action**. His gospel is largely made up of a series of accounts of Jesus healing the sick, freeing the possessed, and coming into conflict with the religious leaders of his time. Everything in it is moving inexorably toward the climax of Jesus' rejection, condemnation and death and then, beyond death, the Easter proclamation of the resurrection.

The text from Mark we read last Sunday stands at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. It sums up what for Mark is the heart and soul, the deepest meaning of Jesus' life and destiny.

"Jesus came to Galilee," Mark tells us, "proclaiming the gospel, the good news, of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in

the good news.’”

Jesus comes from God and **proclaims God’s word**. He is like a herald announcing an event, an event which he describes as the near approach of the reign or kingdom of God.

The phrase **the kingdom of God** is rooted in a traditional biblical image of God. In the ancient Near East, kings were important and powerful figures. Their responsibilities included the protection and care of their people. They led them in battle and saw to their well-being. It was natural to think of God as a king, a great king over all the earth.

To say in the time of Jesus that the reign or kingdom of God is at hand, is to say that the end times are near and that God himself is about to intervene in the world, to become present to humanity in a new way.

In beginning his ministry with the phrase, **“the time is fulfilled,”** Jesus roots himself and his mission in the whole sweep of biblical history. The reference is to texts like today’s first reading in which Moses speaks of the coming of a future prophet like himself. All the writers of the New Testament see Jesus in relation to, and in continuity with, the history of Israel and its great prophetic tradition. They read what we call the Old Testament in the light of Jesus and use Old Testament characters and themes to deepen and to give expression to their understanding of him.

Although, for some people at the time, the theme of God’s kingdom was focused primarily on **judgment**, Jesus describes its coming as **good news**. It is life-affirming, life-enhancing. It brings wholeness and healing, and confronts and overthrows the power of evil.

Today’s reading is typical of the many brief vignettes that make up Mark’s gospel. It is the Sabbath and Jesus, as was his custom, goes to the synagogue and, when invited, speaks, probably on the readings of the day. It is typical of Mark that he says nothing about what Jesus teaches but

focuses rather on the impression he makes on his hearers. People are astounded, for, as Mark puts it, “he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes.” The phrase suggests a moral and spiritual as well as an intellectual authority. In modern terms, one might say that Jesus was a **charismatic figure**.

Among those present in the synagogue is “a man with an unclean spirit,” which recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God and is terrified. When it is driven from the man, the people are even more amazed.

For the evangelists, the healings and exorcisms of Jesus are signs of God’s presence with him and of divine power working through him. Jesus’ actions affirm that the coming of the kingdom will mean the overcoming of the forces of evil and the making whole of human life.

The Jesus in whom the gospel writers believe is the risen Christ, the Christ who is alive and continues to be present to the church and to individual believers. For them, the way Jesus was is the way he is. He continues to liberate people from their inner demons, to heal them spiritually, to offer them forgiveness and the possibility of a new and renewed life. In proclaiming the in-breaking of God’s kingdom, Jesus invited his hearers to undergo **a conversion of mind and heart**, and to believe in the good news. In our Sunday celebrations, he addresses the same invitation to us.