

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

<sup>12</sup> The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Conventional thought is that heaven and earth are two different realms. Earth is where we live. Heaven is where we hope to go after we die. Rarely do they ever touch or intersect, and when they do, many think, that contact is perceived as an angry father scolding or punishing a delinquent child.

But that's not the picture that Jesus' life shows us. God became human to show us a different way to see life, a different way to live life.

In Jesus' Baptism, not only was the whole notion of what Baptism is about changed from the Jewish ritual of washing away sin, to one of Naming and Claiming as a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold, but the connection between heaven and earth was also redefined. Indeed the heavens were – as Mark's Gospel describes – torn open. But it was not a momentary opening. They were remain open.

After Satan tried to close the opening, by getting Jesus to renege on the offer from God on all our behalf, Jesus sallied forth from the wilderness triumphantly and repeated the Good News: the Kingdom of Heaven is still "at hand."

Side by side.

Always available for entry.

Jesus was READIED in His Baptism.

He was SET on His way with the wilderness experience and now it was time for Him to ... to what?

Ready, set, WHAT?

The Gospel, according to Mark's rendition, is not simply "good news." It is good news in the midst of a world that sees it not. It is good news in the midst of a world that reeks of the words of Satan: "If you're good, then prove it."

In His baptism, the divider between Heaven and Earth were torn down, and the Kingdom of Heaven was readily made "at hand," but Satan is still whispering through the ages, "You're not really a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold. Prove it."

Jesus announces that the Kingdom of Heaven is AT HAND. But He also announces that entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven requires two things: **REPENTANCE** and **BELIEF**.

**"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."**

These are the first words of Jesus' first earthly sermon. And those words announce what His whole life and ministry are about.

Jesus not only PREACHES the Kingdom. Jesus **IS** the Kingdom.

The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. But entrance still requires HUMAN PARTICIPATION. The entrance is made through **REPENTANCE** and **BELIEF**.

**Why is it so difficult to repent and believe the Gospel – that we are loved by God and are called to embody that love during our time here on earth?**<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the answer to that question is that we hold on to **so many worldly ideas that do no fit with the Good News**.

In an article appearing in the magazine *The Journal of Christian Healing*, entitled "Following Jesus into Faith," Beatrice Bruteau names some of these ideas:

- ⌘ Health and beauty, money and power are necessary for happiness.
- ⌘ I am identified by my body, personality, and possessions.

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<sup>1</sup> John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, (Collegeville, MN: Order of St. Benedict Publishing, 2005) p. 82

- ⌘ My welfare is more important than yours.
- ⌘ No one willingly gives up power.
- ⌘ The world is here for us to exploit.
- ⌘ No one can be trusted.
- ⌘ There have to be winners and losers.
- ⌘ They hurt me, so I must get even.
- ⌘ I can't feel good about myself unless I'm better than somebody.
- ⌘ Some people are supposed to dominate other people.
- ⌘ If everyone were good, life would be boring.
- ⌘ As long as I maintain control over the circumstances, I can control my own worth.

Can you think of some other values that are inconsistent with the Kingdom of Heaven that control your life?

Sometimes it's hard to see them in the mirror; sometimes we can see them in other people's lives easier than in our own.

Sometimes we have to leave home in order to find ourselves. I know that it was in my trips to Belfast, Northern Ireland, where I witnessed religious prejudices being lived out – prejudices that have absolutely nothing to do with religion, really – and which prejudices seem so normal and everyday to them, but so ugly and strange to me. It was in seeing those prejudices and strange ways of thinking there that my eyes were open to how we have different prejudices and strange ways of thinking here in America, that I had been unable to see before.

It was on a street in East Belfast, next to the dividing wall of block and barbed wire, separating the Catholic neighborhood from the Protestant neighborhood, where the little five year old Protestant lad asked us, "How many arms and legs to Catholic children have?"

What values that are inconsistent with the Kingdom of Heaven have been given control in our life?

What cultural values control our lives so much that we don't even recognize that they separate us from the Kingdom of Heaven, where **we are loved by God and are called to embody that love during our time here on earth?**

Recognizing that we hold these Satanic beliefs is just the first step.

The **SECOND STEP** is to realize that **"WE HOLD"** the belief. It is our choice. That belief has not been forced upon us. **We have to POWER and CHOICE to HOLD ON or to REPENT, i.e. TO LET GO AND GO A DIFFERENT DIRECTION.**

In learning of the ways of the Kingdom of Heaven, it is always appropriate to ask good questions a second time:

**Why is it so difficult to repent and believe the Gospel – that we are loved by God and are called to embody that love during our time here on earth?**

Because the Good News is about a **SPIRITUAL** reality and our belief in that reality involves a **LIFELONG** process.

The spiritual reality of the Kingdom of Heaven's Good News is indeed right at hand – so close. But the distance is not hastily traversed.

There are things of the spiritual nature in life that we have a hard time accepting. One of those beliefs of which we need repent is the notion that "spiritual" is not real.

We have to get over the notion that only if we can understand it, can it be real.

The notion of some kind of visitation to a living person in this world of a person who has died and entered a different place – we have been taught that such things are silly and unreliable. And yet – I have been surprised in my recent polling – how many people have experienced such a thing. When I have been in groups and asked if they have either experienced such a thing or personally known someone who has

experienced such a thing and told them about it – almost always, almost every hand goes up in an affirmative answer.

But very few people are willing to talk about such things, for fear of being thought of being “weird.”

How many of us have comprehended that something very mysterious goes on in Baptism and in Holy Communion – those *holy mysteries* of the Church, that defies definitive description?

The longest 14 inches in the world, I suspect, is the 14 inches between the head and the heart.

It takes a whole lifetime to prepare a soul for eternity.

But that surely doesn't mean that we have lots of time to piddle around. Quite the contrary: it TAKES a WHOLE lifetime to prepare a soul for eternity.

✦ The Good News begins with Jesus.

✦ The Kingdom of Heaven – close at hand – is found in Jesus.

✦ Kingdom living was demonstrated by Jesus.

Our membership vows call us to a life of prayers, presence, service, gifts, and witness.

Through SERVICE our faith IN Jesus will gradually become with WITH Jesus.

His final teaching in Matthew, prior to the events of His passion, death and resurrection, was about how the sheep are separated from the goats, in the Kingdom of Heaven. The sheep are the ones who treat the least, the last, the lost, as though they are Jesus.

There are things of the Kingdom of Heaven that are indeed very, very real, which we cannot clearly define nor understand. But they are real, nonetheless.

One of the ways we come to BELIEVE in them is to DO THEM.

Through SERVICE our faith IN Jesus will gradually become with WITH Jesus.

Jesus warns, in His teaching, about storing up treasures on earth, instead of treasures in heaven.

Indeed investments in the “success” formulae of the world – those beliefs of which we need repent – prevent us from experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven which is at hand.

But those treasures in heaven can readily be stored AND ENJOYED right now. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Repent and believe in the Good News.

The Kingdom of Heaven is IN JESUS. Repent and look for Him

✦ in the one beside you,

✦ in the one sitting near to you,

✦ in the one living on the “other side of the tracks” from you, and

✦ in the one whom Jesus also loves but the culture has taught you to think of as less than you.

Jesus was **READIED** in His Baptism.

He was **SET** on His way with the wilderness experience and now it was time for Him to ... to what?

**Ready, set, WHAT?**

**Too often, I fear, we in the Church are Ready, Set, Set, Set, Set, and we never get around to GO-ING.**

**The time is at hand. It's time to GO! Repent and believe in the Good News. The Kingdom is at hand.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.