

Conversion: The Kingdom of God is at Hand
Cistercian Abbey Our Lady of Dallas
January 25, 2015
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Readings: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Gospel: Mark 1:14-20

The readings today have a familiar theme – perhaps too familiar: conversion. Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach conversion. St. Paul speaks about the attitude that we, converted to Kingdom of God, should have towards the present age. And Jesus announces the “gospel of God” (14): the advent of the Kingdom of God and the call to repentance. In the second part of the Gospel for today, we watch a few Galilean fishermen accept the invitation to participate in this Kingdom, leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus.

Conversion is a word we give for that life-long process of *turning around* and *changing direction*, of allowing ourselves to be transformed and led by the will of another. At first we were going in one direction, in a direction determined by our own eyes and vision. But then we hear a call – it may come from above, below, left, right or from somewhere unknown – and it makes us *turn around* and *change direction*. We are brought to walk along a new path, one outlined by the eyes and vision of another.

Said like that, conversion would appear to be a universal human experience; and Jonah, St. Paul and Jesus would appear to be just three of tens of thousands of preachers in the world. For everyone – whether he or she is Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, agnostic, atheist, whatever – knows what it is like, at some point, to turn around and change direction at the word of another. The experience of realizing that a certain path leads to unhappiness or failure and the consequent desire to *turn around* and *change direction* are known to all of us. Every religion, philosophy and advertisement ultimately asks us for some kind of conversion – to *turn around* and *change direction*: come here to find a church, go there to join this group, think this way, give your money to this, buy this and sign up for that. Even the content of the calls to conversion in various religions and philosophies of the world often sound the same, or at least a large part of them: believe in God, be good, love your neighbor, do corporeal works of mercy, give money, pray, forgive, believe, hope, love....

But if that is my conversion, am I yet a Christian? If all calls to conversion are basically the same, then there really is no such thing as Christianity – Christianity is just one more name for the

same old thing. But if the Christian call to conversion is something more, can I say whether I have yet heard and embraced it? In our pluralistic world, our world of endless advertisements and sales pitches, of endless calls to think and to act in new ways, is the Gospel at risk of getting lost in the fray, of sounding to me like one more summons to the same old thing, one more “world religion” asking me to fear God, to love my neighbor; to be good and virtuous; to work hard; to pray; to be honest and humble; to give my time and money to charity, and so on. We should ask ourselves: Have we heard the call of the Gospel rising above the fray? Have we responded to the specific character of its message? Can we identify that character?

UNIQUE ASPECT: THE CHARACTER OF THE KING: “The Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe in the Gospel!” This call to conversion really does strike me as different from anything else I have heard. Whatever it may share with other calls, it represents something specific.¹ To appreciate that one could try to unpack what the words “Kingdom of God” meant for Jesus Christ, the King who, to the surprise of everyone, reigned from the wood of the cross, crowned with a crown of thorns and anointed with funeral oils. For the character of the King tells us a lot about the character of the Kingdom; this King who annexes the earth with the banner of his cross, leaving behind an army of angels in heaven (Mt 26:52-54²) – save for those who ministered to his weakness in the desert (Mk 1:13; Mt 4:11), or those who comforted him after he bled and cried in Gethsemane (Lk 22:43).

UNIQUE ASPECT: CONVERSION AS FOLLOWING: One could also learn a lot about the specific character of the Christian call to conversion by observing the way in which the first Christians responded to it: as the Gospel for today puts it, they responded by “following” Jesus, by becoming his disciple. Wherever he went, they went. Whatever he did, they tried to do. And when they failed to do what he did, they picked up the pieces and tried again. To become a Christian for them did not mean being able to understand or to express some deep knowledge about God. On the contrary, the disciples were full of misunderstanding – even after the resurrection they were incredulous and afraid! After scores of disciples left Jesus for their inability to understand his words about the Eucharist, Peter and the others did not stay because they understood them so well. At least according to the text of the Gospel, the reason they stay is quite simple. When Jesus asks the

¹ And I think this *newness* – this bit that not everyone else says and does – ultimately makes the whole idea of conversion make sense.

² “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?’”

twelve whether they too will abandon him, Peter replies, not “Oh no, we understand what you mean. Everything is fine” but “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” What it meant for them was something quite humble and beautiful: it meant simply marveling at this person, Jesus of Nazareth, and trying to live, see and love exactly like him.

UNIQUE ASPECT: THE IMMEDIACY OF THE KINGDOM: Both of those ways are helpful: 1) to talk about the character of this Kingdom; and 2) to talk about the response of those who heard the call to enter it. But I would like to try to appreciate the unique character of the Christian call to conversion by paying attention to two small, deceptively familiar words in this call, two words whose newness might be overlooked on account of their simplicity: this Kingdom of God is said to be *at hand*. This Gospel to which we convert, is already in, upon and among us – it is in our midst, as Jesus says.

I think this is something specific to the Christian understanding of conversion; and therefore it is something worth pondering. All other calls to conversion I can think of make their case by reference to something out there and ahead of me; something in the future; something to be sought after; something to work for or earn; or in any case, something I don’t yet possess or enjoy. I am not yet righteous; I am not yet in possession of the truth; I am not yet on the winning side; I am not yet in safety; I am not yet beloved by God. This distance between me and the goal is the motivation for conversion; for conversion is supposed to overcome this distance. But the Gospel is different. There is certainly a dimension of striving, of looking for the future; but there is also this curious statement of Jesus: the Kingdom of God is *at hand*. What I strive for is already coming to fruition in and among me. What I wish to enjoy can already be tasted and possessed.

In a way, these two words could be said to sum up all that is distinctive about the Christian Gospel. For they express an immediacy of God’s presence and action in the world that is at the heart of all we say about Jesus Christ and the Church. These two words – “at hand” – indicate the heart of Christian faith. For in these words, we hear announced that this Kingdom is not one which comes about on the strength of our own efforts; thanks to the benevolence of God, it is already here in seed form, and therefore in essence. God did not wait until we were beautiful to dwell among us; he dwells among us now to make us beautiful. We do not have to wait until heaven to meet God; *he* – and not simply his prophet – was and remains among us in Jesus Christ. This God is with us always, even until the end of the age (Mt 28:20). And therefore when we gather to celebrate the sacraments, or to read the Scriptures at mass, we believe that Christ and his Kingdom are *at hand* –

we believe that God breaks through time and space in order to touch down in our lives and to allow us to live directly from his own divine life, as branches from a vine.

The immediacy of the Kingdom of God expressed in these two words – “at hand” – colors our whole experience of conversion. It means that our motivation to convert is not a threat or a bribe, for the consequences and rewards of conversion are already available. The explanation for the imperative in Jesus’ call to conversion – repent and believe – is a simple indicative: *the Kingdom of God is at hand*. How the experience of this call is felt by each of us may differ according to our subjectivity. But looked at objectively, this call to conversion is an invitation, not a threat or bribe. For we are told to convert for one reason: *the Kingdom of God is at Hand*.

Our motivation for conversion is, therefore, a simple message: the world and its history are different *now*, for the Kingdom of God is *at hand*. Another way to express what is unique about the Gospel is this: Other calls try to convert us by telling us we need to act in order to make up for some lack. The Gospel tries to convert us first and foremost not by telling us we need to act but by informing us that *God is already acting*. Jesus does not say “Follow me because you are a sinner and need to learn to love and to be loved” or “Follow me because you are ignorant and need to be taught” – these things may be true enough but they do not get at the most specific character of his way of calling us to follow him. Jesus wants to be followed because in him the finger of God is acting to drive out demons – because in him the Kingdom of God has come upon us.³

All this shows that most essentially Christians do not convert – as so many others appear to do – in order to “get right” with the Almighty, or to conform to an absolute or eternal truth we could never escape. Many calls to conversion make such an appeal. But the Gospel call is different, I think, inasmuch as it is about following the invitation of someone concretely addressing each and every one of us *right here and right now*, inviting us all to cooperate in his Kingdom. The motive for conversion is about living, working, playing and loving with the one true God who is *at work – at hand* – in the world. “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” Jesus says (Mk 1:15); in fact, it “has already come upon you,” (Mt 2:28); and it is “in the midst of you” (Lk17:21). God is here acting in our lives. We do not convert for fear of him; we convert for love of him and a desire to participate in his beautiful plan.

God is at work transforming all things. His Kingdom is at hand, *now*. And so the choice of Christian conversion could be said in the following way: God is working. Will we believe that the

³ “But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk 11:20).

Author of all life and love is at work? And will we work with him? Jesus said, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Mt 12:30). This, I believe, is the meaning behind the mysterious saying about the one unforgivable sin. All sins can be forgiven save one; for Jesus says, “blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven” (12:31). To say that the Spirit of God is not breathing over the waters of creation and history – that God is not capable or loving enough to act in the world to redeem us. To reject or to despair of his Spirit acting within the world, to kill his prophets to protect one’s way of life, to believe his Kingdom is not at hand – this is what can exclude us from the Kingdom.

God is at work. His Kingdom is at hand, *now*. And so each of us has the choice: either to live privately, isolated in our own narrow projects as if God were *not* acting in the world, or to live in communion, allowing our lives to be drawn up into his comprehensive plan for all creation, into the meaning for which all things exist. We have to choose, and we have to do it now: either to blaspheme against the Spirit, pretending as if he does not blow over my corner of creation and history, pretending that I have a private world outside the Kingdom – that the Kingdom is not *at hand*; or I can choose to embrace the Spirit of the living God, allowing his newness and energy to be my life-breath, docile to his desires and promptings like the sails of a ship – to live in the Kingdom that is *at hand*. For the Kingdom of God is at hand, *now*. Will I hold on to my “distant” province, trying to escape from the power of the King for as long as possible? Or will I respond to him? Will I join forces, living and working with him for the life of the world? This world is going somewhere – it is going towards life; it was meant for the glory of God, which as St. Irenaeus once said is man living fully by the light of his face.⁴ I can choose to get on board or not. Will I kick bitterly against the goad? Will I try futilely to protect my private sandcastle by throwing myself against the tide? Or will I allow myself to be remade, to die to myself so as to live for God.

The Kingdom is *at hand*. And therefore St. Paul insists that nothing in our world can be seen the same way: “I tell you brothers, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away” (1 Cor 7:29-31). Obviously, this does not mean that after mass husbands need to say to their wives, “Well good morning my beautiful lady, but what are you doing in my car?” As St. Paul makes clear, the one who converts does not ignore his or her life but rather takes on a new attitude towards

⁴ Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei (*Adversus haereses* 4.20.7).

everything in his or her life: the Kingdom is at hand; “the world in its present form is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31). Nothing can be enjoyed, possessed, spent, begun or ended for private purposes. Spouses are still spouses. Those who own still own. Those who use still use. But *everything* stands in a certain tension now, the tension of God acting in the world, the tension of the Kingdom coming to fruition.

This means that if Christians convert or give their time, talents and treasure to charity, they do not do it for precisely the same motivation as the followers of other religion or philosophies. That is, Christians do not convert or give their talents and treasure to charity simply because it is the “right thing” to do. We do these things because God is among us asking us personally – in our life of prayer and discernment – to participate in his Kingdom in a personal way, to live in the world as it is being caught up into God. This means that we cannot divide our lives: this half for God, this half for me. I cannot feel good about a million-dollar donation to some good work, if I take a selfish attitude towards the million I keep for myself. Maybe a member of another religion or philosophy could feel good about a million dollar donation, and therefore justified in spending his second million however he or she pleased. But as a Christian, every penny I own – every minute, every talent, every relationship – must be caught up into the plan of God for creation and history. This is why Jesus says the widow’s mite of two pennies is worth more than “all the rest” (Lk 21:1-4). It is worth more millions because it is *all*, though two pennies. This does not mean that, in order to give like a Christian, I must empty my bank accounts; nothing in the Gospel works so mechanically. But what it does mean is that for every dollar of my millions – or hundreds – I must think of myself as no more than a steward, who carries out his charge in constant fidelity and prayerful communication with his Lord and King. Whatever the law of this land may be, for us Christians there is simply no such thing “private property” – that is, there is no corner of creation to which we can hold onto for some absolutely private purpose, to the exclusion of God’s design.

Because the Kingdom is at hand, we believe God speaks to us, inviting us to work with him, to cooperate in his mighty design for every atom and life in this universe. I think this motivation for conversion makes sense of the Christian idea of vocation. The Christian call to conversion to the Kingdom does not refer to a purely objective content or norm upon which we are all supposed to allow ourselves to be molded. The call to conversion includes a very subjective content as well, inasmuch as God – who is among us, in us – speaks to each of us in our hearts, inviting us to embrace some particular place in the universal Kingdom for all. In other words, his Kingdom is not an empire for faceless minions marching to an almighty will. His Kingdom is like the banquet of a

family, with billions of relatives, generations and races laughing, playing and enjoying each other's smiles, personalities, stories and gifts. His Kingdom is the dwelling place with many rooms (Jn 14:1-3). His dream for us is the Body of Christ, where each of us lives as a cherished member. When we hear the Gospel call to conversion, we are not being asked to squeeze ourselves into an extrinsic, rigid system or mold. We are being asked to follow the Spirit of God speaking in and among us, calling each of us by name to a place at his table.

The Gospel is a recipe for excitement, for playing and working with the Author of all life and love. Every element of our lives exists in tension of his Kingdom coming into bloom. Let us hear the call, the invitation, work with the Almighty, to let his Spirit blow everywhere in our lives, to allow ourselves to marvel at his Son, leaving behind everything to live and die like him.