

Return to the Kingdom of God

Michael J. Nielsen / General

Return to the Lord / Kingdom of God; Service / Exodus 9:1–6; Psalm 145:8–13; Romans 14:3–17; John 18:28–38

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.

A pastor is summoned to a nursing home in rural Wisconsin to offer the Commendation of the Dying for an elderly member of the congregation nearing the end of life. His words bring comfort and peace to the assembled family as they gather together to share stories, comfort one another, and await their loved one's final breath. Welcome to the Kingdom.

A young mother tentatively steps into the lobby of a small congregation in Kansas, seeking some assistance to pay a long-overdue power bill. A member of the congregation, who has volunteered to serve, sits with her, listens to her story, prays with her, and contacts the power company to pay her debt. Welcome to the Kingdom.

A homeless man is found sleeping on the sidewalk in front of a Georgia church early one Sunday morning. The elder who finds him welcomes him inside, provides him with a grocery bag full of food, and invites him to stay for worship. Welcome to the Kingdom.

On Sunday morning, you line up at the rail in front of the altar, and your King feeds you with His very own body and blood, taking away your sins, strengthening your faith, and building you up in His image. Welcome to the Kingdom.

What does it mean to be in the Kingdom of God? Pilate struggles with understanding this in today's Gospel, and it can be hard for us, who actually are in the Kingdom of God, to grasp it as well.

Our sermon series this Lent has focused on God's calling, which we first heard in the Book of Joel:

English Standard Version Chapter 2

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.

We've seen our own sinfulness, but we have also heard how God continues to pursue us, encouraging us to turn from our sins and return to Him. Today, the invitation is for us to return to the Kingdom of God, and our Readings lead us to consider exactly what that phrase entails.

We hear the phrase "kingdom of God" and tends to imagine it as a place. Maybe the kingdom of God is confined in the walls of the church, where God does of Him most visible and obvious work. Certainly, it is here, but it is not limited to this place.

Perhaps the kingdom of God follows the pastor around—sort of a mobile kingdom centered on the things that God does through some of His most devoted and humble servants. But that doesn't seem right, either, since we have all heard stories of pastors who have fallen from grace and embarrassed themselves and scandalized their congregations with their human failures. No, it can't be centered around the pastor.

What if the kingdom of God is purely heavenly? Maybe it's all about the day when we will be in His presence and under His protection after we have moved on from this earthly life. But that can't be it; Jesus Christ broken into the world...took on our flesh...died for our sins. And He did it all right *here*. You can even visit the place where He was born, the place where He grew up, the place where He died. It seems silly to argue that all of that happened outside the kingdom of God. After all, if it's not where Jesus is, where could it possibly be?

The chief priests turned Jesus over to the Roman Government that Friday morning. Their intention was clear: this man must die! Pilate tried to de-

escalate the whole thing, but he was backed into a corner. So he brought Jesus in to try and get to the bottom of it.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asked. This was no idle question. Pilate clearly understood what the chief priests had been up to, and he had a pretty good idea of why Jesus had been turned over to him. Best to get right to the point and lay it all out on the table.

But Jesus can't answer a question like that. At least not if He hopes to be understood. Pilate has a particular understanding of what it means to be a king, and Jesus' kingship doesn't really fit into any of Pilate's categories. He could admit that He's a king, but Pilate wouldn't understand that; he might think that Jesus was vying for political power, that He was a threat to the Roman Empire. But He's not; He is King on a whole different plane.

Jesus probes, essentially asking, “Did you come up with that question all by yourself, or did somebody tell you to ask it?” Pilate is in no mood to play games with this man. “Listen, I'm not a Jew, and frankly, I don't care who the 'King of the Jews' might be. But You've rubbed somebody the wrong way, and they've turned You over to me. So help me understand what this is all about.”

Jesus tries His best to explain to this man who doesn't grasp who Jesus is and who doesn't understand why He is standing in front of him. “It's not a kingdom like you would imagine. If it were, My followers would be rioting in the streets and staging a coup. But they're not. Because it's not that kind of kingdom. It's something else...something bigger...something much more important.”

Pilate chews on that for a moment. “So, You *are* a king?”

Jesus' answer is terrific: “You say that I am a king,” which is a little like Him answering, “Now you are starting to get it.” But He goes on to explain that He is the kind of king who has come into the world to point folks to something more important than they had ever understood before. He came “to bear witness to the truth.” And if you get it, then you get it: “Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice.”

And at that point, Pilate basically gives up.

But you don't, because you are "of the truth." And even when you don't fully "get it," you do have some understanding.

As we went through those scenarios at the beginning of the message, I saw several of you nodding. You understood that the "kingdom of God" is not about geographical boundaries, it's not about particular groups of people. It's about Jesus. It's about the work of the Holy Spirit. It's about a loving God who invites, forgives, encourages, and builds up.

The kingdom of God exists wherever the loving activity of God is playing out. In hospital operating rooms, where miraculous healing occurs; in drug treatment programs, where addicts who have hit rock bottom finally manage to control their demons and begin to dig out of their situations; in food pantries, where people gather to pray before school, in a voters' meeting, where the whole congregation comes together and agrees to remodel for a Childcare Center to care for the youngest members in their community and to share the love of Jesus with their families.

God calls you and I to be part of His reign and rule. To witness the work that He is doing in our midst and to participate in it. To play a role as hands and feet of God to share His love with others, both inside the church and outside of it. That's the kingdom that God has called you to. Rejoice, dear brothers and sisters, that you are subject to the One who created you, the One who redeemed you, the One who sanctifies You. For He is the best King in all of creation.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus your Lord and Savior, your King. Amen.