

Rejection of the Covenant First Week in Ordinary Time Friday, January 15, 2016
7:30 PM **1 Sm 8:4-7, 10-22; Mk 2:1-12** (BVM) (Healing Mass) (Kingdom of God
a totally different kind of power)

We are reading from the First Book of Samuel. This is not an idle story; this is a story of extraordinary importance. **“When this takes place, you will complain against the king whom you have chosen, but on that day the Lord will not answer you. The people, however, refused to listen to Samuel’s warning and said, ‘Not so! There must be a king over us. We must be like other nations, with a king to rule us and to lead us in warfare and fight our battles.’”**

That is one of the most important events in the entire history of the Old Testament. And it’s directly related to everything else, and especially to Jesus and his proclamation that “The kingdom of God is at hand,” because this is the rejection of the kingdom of God, because in the Old Testament one of the oldest psalms proclaims “Yahweh is king.” Yahweh is the name that the people gave to God, at least God in his intimate connection to them. It was Yahweh who walked in the cool of the evening with Adam and Eve in the story of the garden. It was Yahweh who wrestled with Jacob. It was Yahweh who spoke to Gideon; an angel appeared, but Yahweh spoke. **Yahweh was their king and their warrior, and it was up to him to guide and direct them. Here they are saying, oh, we don’t want him anymore.** We want an earthly king, “like all the other nations,” the goyim. We want to be like gentiles. We don’t want to be chosen. We want to be like everybody else. And we want “a king who will rule us and lead us in warfare and fight our battles.”

This is actually pretty sad. But **desperate people do desperate things**, and they were desperate. They were pressured. They were pushed. They were tried. And in the heat of this trial, this pressure, they decided to give up on God. But, oddly, **they didn’t give up on God completely because they went to God’s prophet and told the prophet to anoint them a king.** And so this is how Saul became king of Israel, to fight their battles.

And, of course, **the prophet warns them about the abuse of power.** And that, of course, became the history of every nation on earth, but that was already the case; now it’s going to become their history. They want to be like everyone else, so they are going to be. “He will set them to do his plowing.” He is going to draft the boys and then he is going to have them do his plowing and his harvesting and “make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.” Then, “he will use the daughters”—he will draft them too—“as ointment-makers, and cooks, and bakers.” Then, “He will take the best of your fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and give them to his officials.” That’s called taxation. And “He will tithe your crops and your vineyards, and give the revenue to his eunuchs and his slaves.” Governments do this sort of thing. The original idea is not exactly democracy; the Hebrews did not have the idea of democracy, and they weren’t exactly equal because there were masters and there were slaves. But **there was a sort of equality; at least the free were all free to serve God as equals.** That was the idea. **That was called the covenant.** And these people are coming to Samuel and saying, you know, this isn’t working. Our arrangement with God isn’t working; we want something different. So that’s the past. That’s what happened before the time of David.

Now Jesus comes and he says, “The kingdom of the heavens is at hand—**the kingdom of God is at hand.**” The kingdom of Yahweh is at hand, if you want to say that. It’s different. **It’s power, but it’s a different kind of power.** What kind of power is it? **He is going to demonstrate what kind of power it is.** But kingdoms are always about power. That’s one of our problems. We think we know, **we think we know what words mean. Kingdom, king, queen—what do they mean?** Well, we have a vague idea. Where do our ideas come from? Oddly, **many of our ideas of kingship and king and kingdom come from fairytales.** In fact, before Europe had any kings, they had fairytales, stories; *Marchen* the Germans called them. They go way, way back. I believe the Arthurian legend preceded the English monarchy. The English monarchy is an historical thing. It came about at some point. The Arthurian legend probably is older, the legend of King Arthur, that is.

So it’s very interesting how the human mind works. We think we know what words mean, but do we really look at them. **Every word has a context.** The words king and kingdom have contexts. Today people say, well, how are we going to talk about this so modern people understand because we don’t have any kingdoms anymore. Well, that’s really not the problem exactly that we don’t have any kingdoms because **no kingdom ever reflected what Jesus was talking about**—never did. He is talking about something different, totally different from what the world calls a kingdom. It was never similar. **What Jesus calls the kingdom he demonstrates when he comes to heal and forgive and reconcile and build up.** That’s the power of his kingdom, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the heavens. It’s very different from any other kingdom. So when people say, well, people don’t know what that word means because the world has changed, that’s not why they don’t know. They don’t know because they don’t know that **what Jesus is talking about isn’t like anything in the world.** It’s intended to be something that contrasts with the world, not similar to it.

That’s what Jesus makes clear in front of Pontius Pilate: **“My kingdom is not of this world.”** But it is about power, but not the kind of power we normally think of. Even if we want to say it’s about armies, it isn’t the normal kind of armies. Jesus said, **“If my kingdom were of this world, my Father would send angels.”** “Angels” is another word for warriors, or the hosts, the heavenly hosts, the heavenly armies, the *sabaoth*. But Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. **And the power that he exerts is not of this world, but now it is in this world.** It’s here and it’s now **embodied in Jesus and embodied in those who believe in him.** It’s very important that those who believe in him realize what a role they have, what a ministry they have, what an important place they have **carrying on this mission of letting the kingdom of God break into, erupt into the world. Now how are you going to do that?** How are you going to be part of it? Well, I can’t explain it to you. **God can explain it to you.** But there is a way.

Now in today’s gospel story, there was this man paralyzed and four other men, friends apparently, decided to take him to Jesus. Well, can you do that? **Can you bring anyone you know to Jesus?** Too often we get so preoccupied with our own neediness, our own problems, our own pains, that we forget we are called to service. **We are called to bring somebody else to Jesus.** Notice it doesn’t say what happens to those four men. But it does say, “Jesus, seeing their faith, says to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’” It wasn’t the paralytic’s faith; it was their faith. They were apostles, and they didn’t even know it. They were disciples. They were the Church at work. So how are you going to bring somebody to

the Lord? You can. These men could. When they got to the house it was blocked. That didn't stop them. I can't quite picture how they did this, but somehow they got up onto the roof, removed the tiles, and lowered the pallet—now I don't know how they did this. It seems like a very elaborate operation. **We are not always so clever and we are not always so elaborate, but we still can do something—we can do something.**

Now there were those who are practitioners of the Law. They were good men, holy men, but they were men of the book. **They knew the Law, but they didn't know the Lawgiver. And they thought Jesus was perhaps overstepping his boundaries.** “Who can forgive sin?” **Well, Jesus' point really is God wants to forgive sin. I'm simply telling them, “Your sins are forgiven.”** It's not a juridical act. It's not like a judge in court saying, “Acquitted.” No, it's not that at all. He is simply stating the fact: God forgives your sins. How does Jesus know that? **Because he knows the Father; he knows the Lawgiver.**

Can we tell people also that their sins are forgiven? Can we really witness to God's love and concern for other people? Well, we can if we know the Father. **We can speak for God if we know God,** if we are familiar enough. Some people may think we are overstepping our boundaries, but we are just speaking the truth; and it's the truth that makes us free.

Now **God works differently in everyone's life.** We know that. We cannot model ourselves on anyone else, even these four men or the twelve apostles or St. Paul or any of the saints. We can't model ourselves on them, but we can look to Christ, **we can look to Jesus. We can ask for his help in listening to the word of God, which he embodies, and letting it influence us.**

So as we come tonight to the Eucharist, **we surrender all that we are and have been to the Father.** And just as the bread is transformed into the body of Christ and the wine is transformed into the blood of Christ—it is no longer truly bread or wine, although it still tastes and looks like bread and wine—so in the same way **God transforms our being.** We still look the same. We still have the same name and the same face and the same social security number, but we are not the same, because God is transforming us into the image for which he created us in the beginning, because every human being on earth is created in the image and the likeness of God. And **when that image and likeness shines forth, radiates, we are a light to others.** And others can see God in us, and we can help them see God in their own lives, and lead them on step-by-step on the path to God's wonderful, providential blessings that he has in store for all of his beloved children. And how **we can stumble in life,** and how we can trip and fall flat on our face—well, we can. And that's why **we need one another to help us get up and keep moving.** We can only keep moving **when we have hope in the future, when we see the future is Christ,** and God is beckoning us, drawing us, dragging us, onward. In fact, Jesus says in the Fourth Gospel, **“No one comes to me unless dragged by the Father.”** That's what the verb actually says—dragged. We are being dragged by the Father to Christ, who has been raised from the dead and awaits us.

Now it's very important that we have in mind that this wonderful blessing awaits us. If I use an example, if you had an old uncle and you knew he was old and you figured that, well, he is not going to last forever, he is going to die one of these days, but you didn't know

that he was actually very wealthy and he has named you in his will. And when he dies you are going to be very comfortably fixed. You may be worried about where your next meal is coming from today, but you know when your uncle dies you are going to be very well off. You will be able to pay your mortgage, pay off your credit cards; you will be able to pay all your children's college loans and retire very comfortably. Now let's say this is a fact. In one case you know that fact because he tells you. So even though right now you've got some problems, but you have a certain sense of comfort because you know, well, these problems will not last forever because uncle is going to be dead pretty soon and I'm going to inherit all his money. Now the same fact could be true, but you might not know about it, **same future awaits you, but if you don't know about it, how does that change the way you live today?** Well, it changes it a lot. **Awareness is a big thing.** If you are not aware of the generosity of your uncle, today you might be very much worried and very anxious and very troubled. And why? Because you don't know, because you are not aware of this wonderful gift that awaits you. **Well, that's why we have the gospel, so we are aware of what awaits us, the glory of God; and we start to put things in perspective.** St. Paul put it this way, **"I think the sufferings of the present age are nothing in comparison to"—he didn't say nothing, but "nothing in comparison to what awaits us."**

Now Paul suffered shipwreck, I think, three times. He was beaten many times. He was betrayed. He was imprisoned. So it wasn't like he was just living in the lap of luxury and comfort. No, he had a great deal of suffering in life, but he said in contrast to what God has promised, it's nothing. **So you may have real problems and real anxieties and real illness.** Don't belittle them. **But it's still in contrast to what is being promised by God—what? We have to keep things in perspective.** That's the gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.