

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME. 2026

I observed last Sunday that the Lord Jesus Christ emerges from a fresh reading of the Four Gospels as deeply compassionate, but not particularly meek and mild. Most people have the vague and lazy assumption that meekness and mildness were His determining traits, but a reading of the Four Gospels demolishes this assumption. His determining traits were Faith and Compassion, and for the sake of Faith and Compassion He was quite capable of being very much the opposite of meek and mild.

This Sunday, I observe that the Lord Jesus Christ emerges from a fresh reading of the Four Gospels as deeply concerned with the Kingdom of God, and only secondarily interested in ethical and moral teaching. This requires an explanation, but it is a simple explanation. He didn't, in the good old English phrase, put the cart before the horse. He did not present an ethical and moral teaching, and then urge people to live up to it. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God, a divine power that He came to unleash into the world. By that newly active divine power, the Kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit, it becomes possible to live a heavenly life on earth. First He proclaimed the Kingdom of God. Then He described what living in the Kingdom of God looks like. Ethical and moral teachings were secondary, essential indeed, but dependent upon a greater and more fundamental reality, the Kingdom of God.

Hence, we read in today's Gospel (Matthew 4:12-23), Jesus declaring "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Repent, that is to say, realize that the old normal human way of doing things leads to a dead end, and that a new normal is at hand, a way of doing things that is empowered by God's spirit and that leads to Eternal Life, not to a dead end. We read that Jesus went around Galilee, "teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom." A new Power is at work in this world.

Ethical and moral teaching is important I suppose; but it is mostly annoying. With some important exceptions, like logical Aristotle or passionate Plato, it is either overly subtle analysis or, more often, elegantly dressed up platitudes, things that sound good but have little practical meaning. "All People are Brothers and Sisters - Alle Menschen Werden Bruder - Fratelli Tutti, etc." It sounds nice - but you could hear it a thousand times a day without it making any difference in your daily life and behavior.

Jesus of Nazareth, by contrast, didn't start with a cloudy axiom like "All People are Brothers and Sisters," and then try to draw conclusions from that axiom. He started with the proclamation of God as Father, Who sent His Son into the World in order to give the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that makes possible a new way of being a human being. After that proclamation of the Kingdom of God, Jesus used dramatic, concrete actions and images to show what that new way of being a human being looks like. "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer the other one as well." "Let the one without sin be the first to cast a stone." "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." "Sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven."

When it comes to the moral problems of our time, we Christians need to put the horse before the cart. The first thing is to recognize and proclaim the Spirit of Jesus Christ at work in the world through faithful and loving believers. Then we can address moral problems confidently, healing this world with the help of a perspective and power from beyond this world.

I know a young lady, studying now in a certain American metropolis, who does not know, and in this life may never know, how close her life came to being snuffed out when it had just

barely started. Her parents were unmarried but acting like man and wife when, despite “precautions”, nature took its course and her mother became pregnant with her. It was highly surprising and outrageously inconvenient. The mother, shocked and frightened, was in a state of panic. Her family and friends gave advice that came from a normal human perspective. “Kill it” (when discussing moral matters, it helps thinking to use the most direct words - when you mean kill, say kill, and then you find yourself having to think harder about what you are saying). Kill it. The normal human perspective is rooted in anxiety and a sense of scarcity. We can’t BOTH give the mother a good life and the baby a start in life, so, since we can’t do BOTH, kill it. I remember the father, whom I had known from earlier in my life, calling me on Christmas Eve (of all days), distraught at the mother’s decision to kill the child. What could I say? At that moment of complete helplessness, there was nothing for it except hope and pray.

There were some difficulties getting the mother to the sinister place where such killings are done, and those perfectly ordinary difficulties added up to one extraordinary miracle. The delay gave the mother time to think and realize, in effect, that “this changes my life, but it doesn’t end it; and while it isn’t what I planned, it could turn out well.” That Christmas, a baby girl was allowed to live. Her mother became a good mother, and she and the father got married and started a family.

The Kingdom of God reached down and touched that mother with something other than the normal human perspective, rooted in anxiety and a sense of scarcity. Someone touched by the Kingdom of God has a perspective of confidence and a sense of plenty. We CAN BOTH give the mother a good life and the baby a start in life. God will help us do it. If we cooperate with His Grace and gifts, we will succeed. By God’s blessings, the people and the resources are available, if we have the courage and charity to seek and use them. There has been a sharp change of plan, but where the normal human perspective sees only loss and disaster, the Kingdom of God sees gain and opportunity.

To the contemporary moral issue of abortion the Kingdom of God responds not with overly subtle analysis or easy platitudes, but with hopeful action. Hopeless action says “kill it.” Hopeful action says, “take care of it and the mother - with God’s help, we can do it.” What the Kingdom of God does is inject hope into what seemed a hopeless situation, the hope that enables someone to say “My life is changed, but not ended,” and to see the unplanned new life as the door to unexpected blessings, in the case I mentioned blessings that keep on coming after nearly 20 years.

While abortion is only secondarily a matter of law, law is hardly irrelevant to abortion. I don’t consider it my place right now to say exactly what the law should say, but I know in general terms what it should and should not say. It should not say “just kill it,” or make that killing easy. It should say “take care of mother, father, and child,” and make that caring feasible. Earthly law cannot embody the Kingdom of God, but it can and should echo it, speaking not from a perspective of anxiety and scarcity, but from a perspective of confidence and abundance.

“Repent,” says the Lord, “For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Discard the normal human way of thinking and doing things, rooted in anxiety and selfishness. Accept in its place the Kingdom of God, and with it the power to think and live with courage and generosity.

Amen.