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Retreat Ministry • Parish Missions

"Come away by yourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile!..." Mark 6:31
Are you ready to accept the invitation?

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As Holy Week Begins:

The Upside Down Kingdom

They welcomed him as king – although what king ever appeared riding on a donkey? But he had preached the coming of a kingdom to people whose thousand-year-old memories of David and Solomon were as fresh as yesterday: memories of conquest, of power and prestige, of wealth and abundance for all, of enemies destroyed. That's what kingdom is supposed to mean! But not for Jesus. His image of the Kingdom is the exact opposite of all those memories. His Kingdom is upside down.

We should know that; the signs were all there. Remember what we heard at the beginning of Lent? Jesus in the desert, being tempted by Satan. And what were the temptations? 1. Turn stones into bread; which is just another way of saying, create an abundance for yourself. 2. Rule over the world – seek power. And then 3: Wow them – demonstrate your power.

But these are not just temptations in the life of Jesus; they are temptations in our lives too. Create an abundance, enough to fill your emptiness and satisfy your hungers. Control others, especially your enemies, by first of all keeping them as enemies. Demonstrate your power, because that shows the world who you really are. But those temptations will not be spoken by some demon whispering in your ear. Rather, they will be found in advertising, in popular culture, and in the speeches of every politician clever enough to have figured out that this is what people really want: wealth, control, power, all the rest. That's the kingdom we want, and we will fall in line behind – and vote for – anyone who claims he or she can deliver such a kingdom.

The problem, of course, is that such a kingdom is a complete perversion of God's Kingdom. In fact, such a kingdom is truly diabolical. But we are still tempted by that illusory kingdom, even though we should know better. Have we not yet lived long enough to suspect anyone who preaches, or promises, that kind of kingdom?

Consider again the message of Jesus: Blessed are the poor, the gentle, those who hunger for justice, those who work for peace, those willing to suffer for a Kingdom radically unlike any this world has, or could ever produce. Blessed are the child-like, those who know how much they need God, those who are willing to be dependent, even powerless (by the world's standards), just as Jesus was. It makes no sense, but we are called to live as citizens of a Kingdom totally unlike, even opposed to, what common sense tells us we should strive to achieve.

And who are the least likely to embrace such a message? Ironically, it is we who consider ourselves religious – even more, those of us who are considered the “professional” religious – because we already know how God thinks and what God wants. And in that certitude, we have again been seduced by the original temptation: to know what God knows. If I know what God knows, I do not have to trust in God because I am now God's equal. It is the Garden of Eden all over again. It is the temptation that has never gone away.

And Jesus came to expose that temptation for the lie that it is. But he ran into a real problem. Not with sinners – Jesus never had a problem with sinners. His problem was with religious people – and that is still the case. Jesus comes proclaiming a God who thinks differently; but religious people already know how God thinks. Our problem is that God wants something which is not what we think God should want. Not only that: Jesus does things that cannot be right, because we religious people know what should be right.

The choice is a stark one: to be blind guides, or God's fools. Never forget that the people who put Jesus to death thought they were serving God, because they knew what God wanted.

We enter these holy days, this Sacred Triduum, as religious people – why else would we be here? But we also enter these days as human people: weak enough, even – please God – sinful enough to know our humanness. We've tried that other kingdom and its illusions, and discovered how empty its promises really are. And so we gather here, prodigals once again, desiring to be embraced by our Abba and Brother, eager to be renewed, to go forth and to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly as citizens of this upside-down Kingdom of God.

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