

"THE FIRST SERMON OF JESUS"

INTRODUCTION Two weeks ago, on the First Sunday in Lent, we considered the first temptation experience of Jesus. Last Sunday, we reviewed the first miracle He performed - changing the water into wine at Cana in Galilee. On both occasions, we drew lessons from these "firsts" of His ministry - lessons that hopefully will be helpful to us. Today, we consider another first in His life - His first sermon. It's recorded in Mark's Gospel, the first chapter.

DEVELOPMENT Every four years, we American experience our political conventions. As you know, the first major presentation at these events is known as the "Keynote Address". It sets the stage and suggests the content for everything that follows.

Jesus delivered what might be called a "Keynote Sermon". God who had spoken in times past to the people through the prophets would now speak to them again - this time through a Son. What would He say? The world of His day was rife with superstition and injustice, suffering and sorrow. What would He say? As His contemporaries, the Pharisees had ascetized religion. The Sadducees had liberalized religion. The Zealots and the Herodians had politicized religion. What would He say?

The answer is given in the first chapter of St. Mark's Gospel. Fresh from the waters of baptism and the rigors of the temptation, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching:

"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe in the Gospel".

ADDRESSED HIMSELF TO INDIVIDUALS Clearly Jesus addressed Himself to individuals. This was to be His practice throughout. It is not without significance that after Mark reports this opening sermon of Jesus, he goes on immediately to show how Jesus went to the Sea of Galilee and entreated two men to come and follow Him.

Let me flash a blinking light of caution at this point. We are not to conclude from the fact that Jesus appealed to men on an individual basis that the only business therefore of the church is to speak to the issues of the individual heart. Some would have it that way. I think we need to remember and keep as a part of our perspective that a part of our heritage reaches back to include those Old Testament prophets who spoke sharply to the entrenched wealth and power. They challenged kings and frequently summoned the nation to repentance.

But back to Jesus. Time and again, we see Jesus alerting men and women to get ready and to stay ready for the Kingdom of God. "The Kingdom of God is at hand" He declared. "Repent and believe in the Gospel".

THE SERMON Let's analyze His sermon. It was a four-pointer. It was brief. It is made up of two assertions in the indicative mood and two words in the imperative. The assertions: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand". The two imperatives: "Repent. Believe".

First, let's think about the indicatives. "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand". These announcements generate and convey some strong currents of urgency. There is something very exciting about what Jesus was saying here. It was not an urgency based on fear or threat. The motivation, rather,

was altogether positive. The time - the appointed time has come! What past ages have longed for has arrived. The Kingdom is now here in the person of the King. Something wonderful wants to happen to you. Let it happen.

Jesus believed that history is not in bondage to impersonal forces. He believed that man's prospects are not at the mercy of dark and demonic powers. He believed that God reigns. That God has a will for history. That with His coming a new age has dawned. God was scoring a break-through. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom is at hand. Or, as the New English Bible has it, "The kingdom is upon you".

Then, the imperatives. The imperatives rise quite naturally from the indicatives. Any time Jesus comes beside us and declares that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom is at hand, we are in something of a crisis. We cannot simply assimilate his word and go on with business as usual. Charles Schultz, the author of "Peanuts" did a cartoon a while ago that depicts a church youth group that is about to embark upon a panel discussion and the leader announces calmly,

"Our panel discussion tonight will be on the meaning of the 12th chapter of the Book of Revelation, after which our entire group will go bowling".

I read the 12th chapter of Revelation the other day and discovered it's not very compatible with bowling. If that chapter is true, bowling really doesn't matter. If the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom is at hand a lot of things we are about simply do not matter. (both in the church and outside the church)

Therefore, we must repent. Why? Because no man, as he is, is ready for the kingdom. In other words, we must shed old ways of seeing ourselves, old ways of seeing the world, old ways of doing, old ways of sinning. And repent - not just once - but constantly, for repentance is both an act and an attitude. It belongs to the middle and to the end of Christian experience as well as to the beginning.

"Believe". Believe in the Gospel. Although this sermon of Jesus is very brief, walking around the text is like walking around a loaded mine field. Words like "kingdom", "time", "repent", and "believe" are loaded terms. They have vexed and divided concerned scholars for centuries. Yet, I cannot help but feel that we make these critical terms more complicated than they need be. Surely, they were not all that difficult for those who first heard them.

Recently I came across a statement that was written by a seminary student in California. It is called a "Theologian's Rewrite" of Peter's great confession. Remember how Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter steps forward and replies:

"You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being; the kerygma manifested in conflict and decision in the humanized process".

And Jesus replies, "What was that you said, Peter?"

What is this Kingdom of God? David Jenkins has helped us with this definition:

"The kingdom of God stands for that realm in which there is finally achieved and established those purposes of God for