

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A 2023

'The kingdom of heaven is close at hand.'

This year most of the Gospels we will hear on Sundays are taken from the Gospel of Matthew. We call this year 'The Year of Matthew.' Today's Gospel records the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and the calling of the first disciples to follow him. It contains the first words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel: 'Repent. For the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.'

'The kingdom of heaven is close at hand?' What do these words mean? What do they mean for you? The kingdom of heaven is close at hand!

For me they mean that we are surrounded by the love of God – enveloped in God's love – and that we are also surrounded by angels and saints – they are very close to us. I believe that the gap between heaven and earth is not a great chasm but indeed heaven is very close to us. Just a thin veil separates heaven and earth.

The problem is that we cannot see this. We cannot see how close we are to the kingdom of heaven. We are like the people the prophet Isaiah describes in today's first reading – a people who walk in darkness, who dwell in a land of deep shadow. That is us most of the time.

St Paul says something similar in the first letter to the Corinthians when he writes that 'now we see through a mirror, darkly; but then we will see face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12). In biblical times the people didn't have mirrors like we do today but would use shiny pieces of metal as mirrors. These gave some sort of reflection but not a clear image.

But there are times, fleeting moments, hopefully for all of us, when the veil is in fact taken away, and we see, ever so briefly, 'a great light'.

I think that is what happened to the disciples in today's Gospel who left everything to follow Jesus. On the surface, this episode doesn't make sense. A stranger comes by, gives a brief sermon, and then says 'come, follow me', and they leave everything to follow him. Who would do that? This episode only makes sense if somehow the veil was lifted and the disciples saw the face of God in Jesus – if they saw the closeness of the kingdom of heaven.

About 25 years ago, a terrible hurricane ravaged the northern part of Venezuela. Thousands of people were killed and whole villages destroyed. The *New York Times* newspaper immediately sent a journalist, a man of little religious faith, to the area to cover the story. He visited a relief station that the Red Cross had set up to give food to the victims. At that moment, that had very little food to give. A girl about 12 years' old came up for food together with two little boys, aged perhaps 5 and 7, presumably her brothers. There were no parents with them – perhaps they had been killed in the hurricane. The Red Cross could only give one banana for the three of them. The girl took the banana, broke it in half and gave one half to one boy and the other half to the other. Then she started to scrape out the inside the banana skin for herself.

The journalist observed her action, and in his article in the *New York Times* the next day, he wrote: 'I saw the face of God in that girl.' What did he see? On the surface, a selfless act of loving kindness. But he saw something more – the veil lifted and he saw the face of God.

And that is my hope for each one of you and for myself this morning: that in this new year – the Year of the Rabbit that begins today – that our eyes will be opened, even if ever so briefly, and we too will see the face of God in our midst, and in our brothers and sisters. That we will see that we are surrounded by the angels and saints and the good things of the Lord, that truly the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.

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