

KINGDOM (REIGN) OF GOD IS AMONG (WITHIN) YOU

Reflecting and meditating on these words of Jesus can transform us. What I mean is that letting these words sink into us can change the way we think and the way we live.

A word of clarification. Either the word kingdom or the word reign can be used. I personally prefer the word reign. Why? Because the word kingdom makes us think of God as a king. That might have been valuable in former times but the idea of God as a king doesn't seem positive to me in our times. A king has power. That power is interwoven with the ability to use force or punishment to make people do as he commands. The power of force seems to me to be a poor metaphor for God who is Love. The scriptures tell us that "God is Love".

Love and force don't seem to fit well together. Love is a gift. It comes from free will. A person can be forced to do things but a person cannot be forced to love. A person may be forced to say they love someone or pretend that they love someone, but that is not love. There is no love without freedom. That is why I see king as a poor metaphor for God.

How about the word reign? This to me is better because it more closely resembles the way I see God. God (Love) is the source of all of creation. Source of people yes but source of all creation. Love not only is the source but also lives in and pervades everyone and everything. Love (God) is not the universe but is the source. At the same time Love (God) is intimately in the universe. I believe that the intimacy is in us in a deeper way than in the rest of the universe. But we must not forget that Love (God) is through everything.

To continue. The Greek preposition can be translated with by the word among or the word within. I see either translation as emphasizing in different ways what the reign of God is like.

Let us start with the reign of God is within. The reign of God is the pervasiveness of Love. This reminds us that this infinite, compassionate, merciful, understanding, healing, forgiving and energizing Love is deep inside us. Indeed I would say that that is who we really are. And as that Love grows within us we are gradually becoming who we really are. That is why only love (Love) can make us deeply happy.

Remember Love respects our freedom. That is why we must be willing to allow Love to transform us. We resist because it means letting go (gradually, usually) of the selfish unhealthy things within us. We cling to those parts even though they are destructive. This applies to me and all of us. It often takes a crisis to shock us out of our stubbornness. Love even helps us to be willing and also works through the painful shocks in our life.

An essential part of this process is seeing ourselves as we really are. This means seeing the deep goodness in the depths of our being. This can be hard when our background has

filled us with shame, guilt and self-hate. We can also be misled by thinking that our goodness is because of our success, our talents, our position of power, our virtuousness, our religiosity and who knows what else.

Whether we live out of inflated ego or deflated ego, we are called and energized by Love to see our true goodness. When this happens we slowly receive the gift of gratitude and humility.

We now turn to the reign of God is among.

I see the word among emphasizing the relationship we have with each other. This of course means that our relationships are gradually becoming more loving. This transformation is greatly influenced by the transformation of truly loving ourselves that we covered last time. Also the transformation into more loving relationships greatly influences our transformation into truly loving ourselves.

There are various ways to grow into more loving relationships. I will treat only one. That is listening. I mean listening, not only with our mind but also our heart. Listening with the desire to understand and to feel with what is going on inside the other person. It means not listening not in order to judge but to understand. As a relationship grows we may be able to offer suggestions. But for the most part it is better to keep our mouth shut and our mind and heart focused on understanding and empathy. I also am not talking about enabling a person in addictive behavior. We must be wise as serpents and gentle as doves.

Also if the relationship is to grow more loving, we must also be listened to in the same way. When the other is talking we listen. When we are talking the other is listening. When we notice our tendency to break in when the other is talking, be aware that we are not really listening. Rather we want to make our point, we are interested in our self.

I want to apply this to personal relationships, to religious relationships and to political relationships.

We now move to listening as applied to personal relationship. We will look at three types.

Relationship between spouses. Sharing intimacy. I believe that the deepest kind of intimacy is sharing the emotions, feelings, and impulses and drives from the older parts of our brain. That is the mammalian brain and the even older reptilian brain. From these come our sexual and aggressive drives. Also our feelings of fear and closeness. This also allows us to fall in love. These and many others are influenced by the newest part of our brain-the prefrontal cortex. This is the rational part that is not present in the animals that are not human. It is also helpful to realize that this rational part of our brain is influenced by the older parts. That is the glory and difficulty of being human.

Much of this we don't want to look at ourselves much less reveal to anyone else. I believe that if spouses are to be deeply bonded and intimate they must enter into the rewarding and painful journey of slowly and imperfectly mutually revealing to each other. (This can also happen in deep friendship. The Irish called such a friend "Anam Cara".) This requires that we listen without judgment and with understanding and empathy. This brings transformation of spirit both in the individuals themselves and in their relationship. Giving advice doesn't usually lead to transformation.

When I was younger I thought that these things coming from the older parts of my brain were either bad or weaknesses. I didn't realize that it was all part of being a human being. I believe that not accepting that we are human is a major obstacle to spiritual growth.

To continue about personal relationships. The relationship of parents and children. This obviously is not the same as adult to adult. Correction and discipline are significant. However, there is an essential role for listening. Revealing ourselves to a child is not going to be the same as parents to each other. Some revealing of our mistakes and emotions can be helpful. Children need to know that being a good person does not mean that we do not make mistakes. But it also includes learning from our mistakes. Another example is children need to learn that being angry does not mean we are bad. But also that anger can lead us to do bad things. And we need to apologize when we hurt someone. Also to learn the difficult path to using anger well. It is not just a tool to get what we want.

Parents (I speak as one less wise since I never had children) need to learn what is behind the moods and behaviors. What is behind the anger. What is behind the silence and withdrawal. What is behind the joy. Unless we are in the habit of listening with understanding and empathy we likely will never know what is really going on within the child.

I think that parenting is perhaps the most important task in the world. If not the most important, at least close to it. I also think that it is among the most difficult tasks.

No one will ever be a perfect parent. Not even close to being a perfect parent. Growing better in parenting, I think, is a goal that everyone wants to pursue.

We now turn to listening in a religious setting. I believe that we grow deeply spiritual (that is letting the Holy Spirit transform us) when religion brings us to be more peaceful within ourselves and with each other.

It is also quite obvious that religion is often the source of serious conflict. There have been many wars that have religion as a major component. I kill you for God who is on my side. How much hatred because of religion? I hate you because you are believing wrong. We say that my belief is the whole truth. God is on my side. (As a disclaimer, I am myself not always peaceful about religion. I pray that the Holy Spirit will lead me in that direction.)

Why this seeming contradiction between religion and peace?

One reason is that our image of God does not lead us into peace. For example, the popular hymn: "Onward Christian Soldiers Marching as to War". What image of God is behind that? We might say we are marching in a war against evil. Perhaps, the trap I see is that we see ourselves as good guys and the others as the bad guys, the enemy. I think that when we are in that mode that some form of hate is almost certain to arrive.

Further, let us suppose that our image of God follows the scripture that God is Love. I see Jesus following that, Jesus reminds us that our heavenly Father allows the sun to shine on the "good" and the "bad". Also, Jesus says, love your enemies. Again, take the log out of your own eye and then you will see straight enough to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Having that image that God is Love is certainly a wonderful way to start. However, it won't do a whole lot of good unless we allow that infinite, merciful, understanding, healing and forgiving Love to transform our inner self. We allow that to happen when we surrender everything (including our most cherished beliefs and habits) to Love to be purified. Even our most virtuous parts must be justified, not to mention the rest.

When we surrender to Love, we will be purified. We will be transformed. There will be pain (we don't want to let go) but it is worth it.

Continuing with listening in a religious setting.

A second reason is that it can easily happen (without any bad motive) that we perform religious rituals and practices without inner transformation taking place. I think that that was what Fr. Richard Rohr meant when he said "Religion is a wonderful place to avoid God".

Religion can become just another way of boosting our ego. That happens not because we are bad but because ego is so tricky. We are really not consciously aware of what is going on deep inside us. That is why no matter who or what we are, we must prayerfully open ourselves to Love to grace us with gratitude and humility. We can't do it with willpower. When we do that we just get proud that we are humble. There are other reasons but these seem crucial to me.

Where does listening come in? We need to hold back from making our point. I don't do this very well. There is a place for saying what we think and believe. I suggest that we focus on listening first.

We learn very little from people who think and believe like we do. At times we may learn something that will deepen us but only because they have a slant that we were not aware of.

For the most part all that happens is that we just get firmly solidified in whatever we think and believe. Rallies do just that. Only God sees the whole picture. Our perspectives, even when they are good are partial.

Let us be open (I find this so hard) to the value that is in the other point of view. My experience is that when I do this I am forced to go to a deeper level to embrace the good that is in theirs and my perspective. Without this we may be smart but we will never be wise.

We conclude with listening in a political setting.

There will always be differences of opinions and perspectives. That of itself is not a problem. In fact it can be very healthy. We have, however, in recent years seen this lead to gridlock and the attitude of my way or the highway. The result is that our country suffers. It limits the good results that our nation needs.

Why is this? I will give an answer that I think is true. I realize that it is not the whole truth.

The problem is what we mean by truth. Reality is what it is. Only God sees reality fully and completely. We humans also see reality. However, because our ability to know is far less than God's ability, we will, even at best, know it only partially. It is good for us to expand our knowledge. At the same time we must be humble enough to recognize that our knowledge is partial. No human can ever know the Truth. Only God knows the Truth.

We have our perspectives and we need them. We also need to act on them but to recognize that we don't have the whole picture. When we see this we become able to become a little wiser.

The conservative perspective is good but partial. The liberal perspective is good but partial. The independent perspective is good but partial. When we are willing to learn from and see the positive elements in the various perspectives, we can go beyond horse trading. We will be able to find much better solutions. It is easy for us (me included) to see ourselves as being principled when really we are just being stubborn and caught in our own little mental world.

When we think that we have the Truth, we are dangerous. Believing that we have the Truth, it becomes so easy for us to run over other people in the pursuit of our good cause. We easily become unjust in what we see as justice. Our egos are so tricky. This has always been a temptation for me.

Listen. Listen. Listen.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay

