

In this second Sunday in Lent, we have now reached the mid-point of Mark's gospel. Up to now, Mark has emphasized Jesus' authority and power. From now on, the emphasis changes to Jesus' suffering, rejection and death. As Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem, he begins to teach his disciples what lies in store. Peter, shocked, rebukes Jesus, horrified to think his master, the Messiah, will be put to death. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter for failing to understand what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

Clearly, Peter thinks of Jesus in worldly terms as a conqueror. A deliverer who will free Israel from Roman domination. A political and military hero. Like the Maccabees, who freed Israel from foreign control in 165 BC. What Peter doesn't understand is that Jesus' lordship is based on servanthood, not mastership. Self-sacrificing love, not domination. Loving one's enemies, not defeating them. Dying to self, not having power over others.

In the words of Greg Boyd, Peter fails to see that Jesus exercises power “under” people, not power over them. Jesus tells us the kingdom of God is near, but this kingdom is not one where rulers lord their power over others. It’s a kingdom where, out of love, people engage in self-sacrificing service. It’s a kingdom where outsiders are insiders. It’s a kingdom where no one is excluded, and all are loved. It’s a utopia but it’s not an impossible dream. It’s found inside each one of us, if we will only look.

As Jesus shows his disciples, the kingdom of God is not something far off and far away. It’s here and now. While the rest of the world may be consumed by power struggles over who controls what or whom, we can live in God’s kingdom today. Once we stop worrying about worldly values and look for ways to serve others, God’s kingdom is a present reality in our lives.

Jesus shows us how it’s done. He heals the sick. He eats with sinners. He washes his disciples’ feet. He feeds the hungry. He never stops giving of

himself. Even to the point of accepting death on a cross. And he always acts out of love. Even for those who kill him. And all to show us what God's kingdom looks like. It looks like him.

This is a kingdom far different from the kingdoms of the world. As Greg Boyd argues in "The Myth of a Christian Nation," the very idea of a Christian nation is a contradiction in terms. Nations use force to achieve their ends, including violence. Jesus never does. Nations exercise power over their citizens. Jesus never does. Nations exclude people considered unworthy of citizenship. Jesus never does. No worldly kingdom can ever be the kingdom of God. Not America or any other nation.

But does this mean that Jesus has no interest in worldly kingdoms? I think not. I cannot imagine Jesus approving of tax laws which allow billionaires to pay little or no tax. I cannot imagine Jesus approving of a government budget which spends over \$800 billion a year on the military. I cannot imagine Jesus approving of a criminal justice system which locks up 1.8 million people. I cannot imagine Jesus approving of a

health care system which leaves 26 million people without health insurance.

On the other hand, I can imagine Jesus approving of programs to house the hundreds of thousands of Americans who are homeless. I can imagine Jesus approving of a program to cancel student debt. I can imagine Jesus approving of any program which provides life's essentials to those who don't have them. Without worrying about freeloaders or people gaming the system.

I agree with those who claim that, as Christians, we are citizens of two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

Sometimes these kingdoms have nothing to do with each other. But sometimes they do. And when they do, each Christian has a decision to make. Which matters more, our allegiance to our country or our allegiance to Jesus?

For me, Jesus comes first. That does not mean I am un-American. What it means is that I judge the words and actions of our government by

Gospel standards. When we help AIDS victims in Africa, I am heartened. When we build a border wall on our southern border, I am not. When we pass stricter gun laws, I am gladdened. When we hand down long prison sentences for non-violent crimes, I am not. How do we treat the have-nots, the outsiders, the marginalized, the forgotten? If we treat them with love and understanding, I cheer. When we turn our backs on them and blame them for their own misfortunes, I shake my head in sorrow. I think Jesus does too.

Jesus tells us that we will pay a price if we truly follow him. We may not be popular. We may even be shunned. I can't say I have ever really paid a price for being a Christian. But there are plenty of people who have, and I have enormous respect for them. People who, motivated by principle, have voluntarily sacrificed themselves for others. Not necessarily their lives but they have sacrificed something they wanted to keep because a higher principle was more important.

Not long ago, my wife Cynthia was attending a volunteer gathering, when a man and his wife came up to her and introduced themselves. The man introduced himself as Fred. Cynthia looked at him and, thinking she recognized him, asked his last name. He said, "Upton." For those of you who don't know, Fred Upton was a Republican congressman from Southwest Michigan for thirty-six years. Solidly entrenched in office, and only in his sixties, he probably could have been re-elected for many more years. Until January 2021. That's when Fred voted to impeach the President.

After that, his career was over. And he knew it before he cast his vote. But he did it anyway. It wasn't because he was tired of being a congressman. It was because something more important was involved. And Fred decided he had to pay the price. He sacrificed his career for a higher cause. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying Fred Upton is a saint. As an heir to the Whirlpool fortune, I know how rich he is. I'm just saying he could have played it safe and kept his job.

And he didn't do it.

I would like to think there's a bit of Fred Upton in each of us. That there are more important things to us than worldly success. That we would pay the price if we were faced with a choice between our Christian principles and the temptations of the world. During this Lenten season, let us be reminded of the temptations Jesus was offered during his forty days in the wilderness. He resisted those temptations. I pray that when we are faced with temptations of our own that we resist them too. And do the right thing. In Jesus' Name, Amen.