

## WHILE WE ARE PREPARING FOR EASTER

Imagine that instead of giving something up for Lent we decide to take on a new way to serve God's people or to raise a question about God for which we have no clear answer. Well, that's what I did. I took on a question for self-study this Lent that I have not been able to make complete sense of for at least the last 36 years. "What does Jesus and all those who translate and otherwise communicate God's Word to us mean when they refer to the kingdom of God ([Luke 6:20](#)) or the kingdom of heaven ([Matthew 6:20](#))?"

To some of us it may seem like an easy question. We might respond that the "kingdom of God" or perhaps even the "kingdom of heaven" is wherever God is. Yes, I agree. More importantly, the previous spiritual leader of over a billion of our sisters and brothers in Christ, Pope John Paul II, announced this as his understanding of heaven several years ago.

I would have been happy to stop with his answer in my first semester of seminary. However, I was in seminary decades before John Paul II gave his interpretation of heaven. Instead, in my first course on the Gospels our one graded assignment was to answer the question "What is the kingdom of God?" We were told to "limit our answers to twenty pages!" Undaunted, I rushed in, as the saying goes, "where angels fear to tread." I took on the assignment confident of my ability to do a thorough job of researching and summarizing what I learned.

To my chagrin I discovered that my "thorough research paper" was not recognized as such by the professor. He gave me a "C" which, in graduate school, is like saying, "Nice try, but you didn't do what I asked." The short version of the story is that I had completely misunderstood the professor's instructions.

While we are preparing for Easter it seems just possible that we too may not have understood much of what God has been saying for thousands of years. If we find it difficult to explain what we mean by the "kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven," imagine how many other questions we might discover if we read the Bible every day—while we are waiting for Easter!

It isn't always clear why we teach what we do in some churches while others offer a whole different interpretation of what it means to live a Christian life. Even what was commonly accepted when I was young, the reality of sin and the need for God's forgiveness, is far from universally accepted. Some of us even question whether we actually do sin. The list of disagreements over beliefs amongst churches is quite long. I certainly don't think that we can summarize them even in the twenty pages I was given in my first course on the Gospels. I have, however, pastored many people who were convinced that the answer to all of our questions about faith is to stop questioning and simply believe everything that Jesus and his early followers taught. Not uncommonly someone tells me that being a Christian is best summarized in the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments or the two great commandments.

My point? It is simply that, whatever else we have to do between now and Easter, it's time to ask our questions of faith. We may or may not be ready to share our questions with other people. However, we can at least bring our questions up from the depths of our unconscious minds or wherever it is that we store concerns that we aren't ready to deal with yet. How better to prepare for Easter than to explore who Jesus was to his followers and is to us?

We can begin by reading one Gospel all the way through at one sitting if at all possible. Then reread it again but one chapter each day. Choose a time of day when you can focus on the Bible without distractions. Record your questions and your understandings of what the text is saying to you. If one chapter is too much, then just read a section of one chapter, but do it each day.

I know that many of us are in a hurry to get to Easter so that we can celebrate the end of Lent. If Lent has been focused on "giving up" rather than recognizing what God has done for us in Jesus, then it makes sense to be happy that we can now have whatever we gave up. However, we have another choice between now and Easter. We can explore where our spirituality is leading us and what kind of inner work we need to do about growing closer to God in Christ Jesus. After all, Jesus' resurrection is what Easter is all about!

As always, feel free to disagree with me. [Let me know](#) what you believe and what you question or disbelieve. I will be glad to read or listen to whatever you care to share about faith.