

In many of his works, the novelist and poet Wendell Berry explores the human condition in the fictional town and environs of Port William, a small farming community in rural Kentucky during the early years of the last century. There its memorable inhabitants go about the oft-uncertain business of trying to eke out a living from the earth, or practicing the trades, or raising livestock.

These things shape their days, but often as the backdrop to the true business of life in Port William: learning how to live and get along in a small, close-knit community by practicing the art, however difficult it is at times, of accepting that people — even good people — have their flaws, their dark sides, the things about them that lead to a variety of troubles for themselves and others, and that more than a few of their neighbors “don’t fit the hole that was bored for [them],”¹ as one resident put it, and still others are in the words of another “as though when [they were] a baby [their] mechanically minded siblings had taken [them] apart and lost some of the pieces, which they then replaced with just whatever they found lying around.”²

It’s an art that fosters the realization among Port Williamites that for all their individual foibles they’re deeply connected to each other, connections that enable the community to enjoy its occasional prosperity and endure its more than occasional hardships, an art, as another resident observed, that in the end rests on the insight that “if God loves the ones we can’t, then finally maybe we can [too].”³

I found myself thinking about Port William in conjunction with today’s Solemnity of Christ the King, the Solemnity in which we anticipate the unknowable day when the Lord comes again to bring His kingdom, the kingdom He inaugurated during His earthly ministry, to its full fruition.

Last week we heard some of what may precede the day and hour which isn’t ours to know:⁴ wars; insurrections; earthquakes; famines; plagues.⁵ Big things, frightening things, that

¹ Wendell Berry, “Watch With Me,” *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories*, Kobo ed. (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2004), 141

² *Ibid.*, 41.

³ Berry, “Pray Without Ceasing,” *That Distant Land*, 119. Emphasis added.

⁴ Acts 1:7 (NAB)

⁵ Lk 21:5-19 (NAB)

will herald the Lord's coming on the last day. But what of all the days before then? Today, for example? Or tomorrow? For as Jesus put it when "[a]sked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, ... said in reply, 'The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.'"⁶

Which is it, then? The apocalyptic spectacle of nations rising against nations and "awesome sights and mighty signs" appearing in the sky,⁷ or the quiet, subtle, and perhaps unnoticed appearance of the Lord who announces Himself in whispers just as He did for the prophet Elijah?⁸

The coming again of Christ in glory involves both, undoubtedly.

For the Lord who in his final words before His ascension into heaven assured us that "behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age"⁹ isn't a God of absence, but of presence. One day He will come again in power and might to bring His kingdom to its ultimate consummation, and in the interim He comes every day when His works of love and mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation are practiced by those who even now, even in the midst of the hatreds and divisions of our time, try as best they can to heal as He taught us to heal and to embrace the outcasts of our age just as He did those in His. In sending the seventy-two disciples to proclaim His Gospel "to every town and place"¹⁰ and, note well, to prepare their inhabitants for His subsequent arrival, He instructed the disciples to "cure the sick ... and say to them, 'The kingdom of God is at hand for you.'"¹¹ The works of Christ, the fruits of His love that His disciples are to offer to others, are themselves "mighty signs" that herald His kingdom.

⁶ Lk 17:20-21 (NAB)

⁷ Lk 21:10-11 (NAB)

⁸ 1 Kgs 19:12 (NAB)

⁹ Mt 28:20 (NAB)

¹⁰ Lk 10:1 (NAB)

¹¹ Lk 10:9 (NAB)

This is one of the reasons why Fr. Anthony's observation last week that the "signs" of Christ's coming pose a challenge for us to reflect on how we, too, proclaim through our works that the kingdom of God is at hand is so important.

As we anticipate Christ's coming again, it's important to avoid falling into the trap of thinking that faith, that discipleship, is something that's lived in the future tense — that is, primarily involving something that *will be*, something we *will do*, something we *will be*, when at last we *will be* in Christ's presence.

Because faith and discipleship are actually lived in the present tense. Faith and discipleship are principally matters of the here and now. They involve who we are, *right now*. They involve what we do, *right now*. Faith and discipleship involve a constant mindfulness that we're in the presence of Christ *right now*, and we're to invite others, too, into His presence, *right now*, and that includes the ones who "don't fit the hole that was bored for [them]" and the ones who're missing a part or two and maybe many more than that.

When Christ the King returns to bring His kingdom to fulfillment, we're not to be afraid, He says, for what the prophet Malachi had foreseen as a day of blazing fire¹² will be something quite different for those who have answered Christ's call to love as He loves, to heal as He heals, to be merciful as He is merciful, to serve as He serves. For them it won't be a day of fear, but a day filled with the healing light and warmth of Christ.¹³

Our faith teaches us that, in many ways, the day of Christ's return will be a day like any other, for it will be a day marked by Christ's presence, just as today is and tomorrow will be, as will every day after that. The kingdom of God, He told the Apostles and disciples again and again, is present whenever and wherever you do the work I've given you to do in whatever vineyard to which I've sent you.

¹² Mal 3:19 (NAB)

¹³ As Malachi had also foreseen. See Mal 3:20 (NAB)

The kingdom of Christ the King is a present reality, not just a future one, and that's why we're not only to anticipate the kingdom, but to help build it.

That's an important aspect of Christ's Kingship: He's King not only of the future, but of the present, and we're to welcome Him not just in the future, but today and every day.

For the truth is, I've seen His Kingdom, and so have you.

We've seen His Kingdom in the love and sacrifice with which His sons and daughters care for sick and dying loved ones — and sometimes for sick and dying strangers.

We've seen His Kingdom in His sons and daughters who feed the hungry and clothe the threadbare, reaching out to those in need, reaching out to those whose names they don't know and often to those whose faces they'll never see, knowing only that those whom they serve, whatever their struggles, are also children of Abraham, as the Gospel reminds us about those who are marginalized or vulnerable.¹⁴

We've seen His Kingdom in His sons and daughters who counsel the lonely and afraid, comforting those, for example, facing an unplanned pregnancy with nowhere to turn and no one to help.

We've seen His Kingdom in his sons and daughters who build access ramps for the disabled, or who bring food to the homebound, communion to the sick, or solace to the hospitalized.

I've seen His Kingdom in all of these things and more, and so have you, and all of these things remind us, as does our Lord Himself, that we're called not simply to be spectators gazing at His kingdom, not merely onlookers who praise it, but builders who work to help complete it.

The life of faith and citizenship in Christ's Kingdom doesn't involve doing extraordinary things, but doing ordinary things with the extraordinary grace we've been given, that in doing the ordinary things of wiping a brow, calming a fear, providing a meal, and all the rest of the work He

¹⁴ Lk 19:9 (NAB)

leaves us to do, others might glimpse the face of Christ and be invited to join Him in His kingdom.

As we celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King by anticipating His coming again, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that Christ will come not only at the end of time; He comes all the time, and we're to welcome Him today in whatever guise He chooses to appear, and frequently He comes in the guise of human need. And when He comes, He comes bearing the message, the message they'd heard clearly in Port William, that if He "loves the ones we can't, then finally maybe we can [too]", or at least we can try to get a little better at it tomorrow than we are today.

The Revelation of John that concludes Scripture closes with the words, "Come, Lord Jesus!"¹⁵

He will. He *will* come.

We know this because, as John also knew: He does. He does come, today and always.

And so it is that in learning to greet Him today and every day, we'll be prepared to greet Him on that unknowable day in the future when "He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, (for) the old order has passed away."¹⁶

¹⁵ Rev 22:20 (NAB)

¹⁶ Rev 21:4 (NAB)