

11th Sunday of Year B – The Kingdom, the Church, and ourselves.

In today's Gospel Jesus shares a vision – the very dream of God. He describes what is in God's heart for us – humanity's future. When God reigns in our hearts and lives what will be our experience?

Jesus says that in the Kingdom of God we will find a haven, a shelter, a sense of community. We will be like birds of the air nestling in the branches of a great tree. In the Kingdom of God, when God reigns, we will find fellowship, security, welcome.

This dream of God had already been shared by the prophet Ezekiel. We heard his words in the first reading: *Every kind of bird will live in its shade, every winged creature will rest on its branches.*

It is Ezekiel's understanding that it will be God's special people, the chosen race, who will be the ones to enjoy the benefits of the Kingdom.

But we know that the Israel of old foreshadows the community of the Church - to be founded by Jesus.

And that Church itself is to be a sign and an instrument of the coming of God's Kingdom into the human family as a whole.

Jesus founds the Church to be an example, a model – to illustrate the fruit of God's grace when it is at work in our hearts and in our relationships with one another.

Ideally then, the Church will be a place where all will feel at home, where all can find shelter and protection in the storms of life, where everyone will feel welcome, wanted, of value.

Ideally, the Church will be a community that imitates well the very life of God – inclusive, respectful, holding each and all persons in an affectionate embrace.

As we know from other parables Jesus preached, in the Kingdom of God the poor, the weak, the outcast, the sinful will be especially welcomed and served.

How does the Church we know, the Church in history, measure up to these standards? Well, or not so well?

Sadly we know that the Church as an institution in history has too often been exclusive rather than inclusive. It has identified with the rich and the powerful rather than the weak and the poor. The Church has often rejected not welcomed the sinner – and still does today in one way or another.

When we are tempted to be critical of the Church for its shortcomings and failures to live up to its high calling it is salutary to apply the same standards to the Church on a smaller scale – to our own parish, and indeed to our own home. How do we measure up locally?

Are our own families forbearing and forgiving, open and welcoming, tolerant and accommodating, patient and encouraging with one another?

Who would feel at home with us? Whom would we not allow through the door? Do we serve one another, or do we try to dominate those around us?

Moreover, as St Paul says, each one of us is a Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are to give God a home in our own hearts. But is there room for God in my busy day?

We are each to have a place in our hearts for our fellows, especially for the poor, the weak, the sad and the sinner. But is that how I find myself to be?

Who do I keep out, and why? Who do I condemn? Who do I demonise?

Our experience of Christ's Church must begin in our own individual selves.

We must each be true to our high calling.

If we are then to that extent will the Church at large become more what Jesus wants it to be – a sign of hope to the world.

We know that the failures of the Church are not the whole story. The Church in its members and in its pastoral mission around the world has also been an instrument of liberation, an agent of peace, a cause of joy.

Church people have set many free – from the chains of guilt and sin, and from the chains of slavery, oppression and exploitation.

Over and again the Church has been the voice of voiceless, the defender of the weak, the champion of the vulnerable, from the aged to the unborn.

Christian people have challenged injustices, sought to remedy abuses, and had a civilising and ennobling influence on societies in every part of the world.

Today we should ask the Lord to enable each one of us to grow in those qualities of heart which are of the Kingdom. May others find in each of us – in what we think and say and do – clear evidence that God dwells among us. May others glimpse in us at least a little something of the glory God dreams of for humanity: That haven, that heaven, where we have all become at one in the joy and peace of Christ.

I, the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.