11 Homily for the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A

22 January 2017

Is 8:23 - 9:3; 1 Cor 1:10-13, 17; Mt 4:12-23

In our longing we intuit the kingdom of God. Our desires and our daydreams are what point us towards heaven. How so? Nearly thirty years ago, Richard Bach wrote a little book, more metaphor than story, that became an instant phenomenon. Entitled ‘Jonathan Livingston Seagull’, it chronicled the flights of a bird named Jonathan. Jonathan was a seagull, though hardly a happy one. He found it too suffocating, too limiting, to remain simply a bird. For him, life had to offer more than just the basic struggle to eat, fight, and occasionally mate. He wasn't exactly certain what else there was, nor indeed what he wanted, but he had the gnawing certainty that what he had right now was not enough. He wanted more, needed more, everything inside of him ached for more, and he decided he would try for more. So, without really knowing where it would lead him, he set out to fly higher and faster than any seagull had ever flown. From flights of speed to flights of fancy, he tried in every way to break the asphyxiating limits of being a seagull.

But the limits of this life are not so easily broken. His efforts wrecked the tranquility of his life and nearly wrecked his body as he flew alone, in lofty solitude, often crashing into rocks even as he was trying to smash through the very barriers of mortality. He ended up a driven bird, congenitally restless, always scanning the distant horizons, haunted by an insatiable yearning for something he didn't know, didn't have, but couldn't live without. This something – something that we don't really know, don't fully have, but can't live without – is what Jesus called the kingdom of God. Moreover scripture tells us that this kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but is about being together in justice, peace, and community of life in the Holy Spirit. In our desires we intuit this. But how does desire lead us to this insight? How does desire work? What, ultimately, do we desire and long for?

Looking at desire and longing within us we see that, for a good part, we can name what we yearn for. We yearn for love, for intimacy, for friendship, for admiration, for success, for health and beauty of body, to be seen, to be known, to be noticed, to be famous, to leave a mark. We yearn too, powerfully and more than platonically, for consummation, for sex, for all-embracing union. We yearn for ecstasy, especially the ecstasy of sexual embrace. Our uncensored daydreams are not the stuff of platonic philosophy or ascetic spirituality. Rather, in them, we are as much mammal as angel, physical as spiritual, and considerably more sexual than celibate. In our daydreams we luxuriate in embrace. Moreover, in them, we are never petty, small, mean, ugly, and ungracious. In our dreams we are big persons, objects for admiration.

But, at the end of the day, daydreams are still only dreams, elusive horizons that keep slipping away from us. Thus, like Jonathan Livingston Seagull, we end up suffocating inside of lives, bodies, and relationships that are perennially too small for us. Our real lives pale in comparison to what we intuit in our daydreams. In our dreams we are always capable of flying, wonderfully beautiful, perfectly consummated, and locked in a dance, body and soul, with the deep rhythms of the universe. Reality however is not so kind. In our actual lives, we find ourselves always heavy, bound to the ground, limited, flawed in body, painfully alone, limping, out of step. In that tension, in the insufficiency of everything attainable, we come to know, as Karl Rahner once said, that here, in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished.

But it is the former, what we experience in our daydreams, not the latter, what we actually experience in our lives, that points towards the kingdom of God. In our longing we intuit that kingdom. In our daydreams, particularly in those that are far from platonic, we have a vision and a foretaste of the kingdom of God because it is here, in our daydreams, where the lamb lies down with the lion, where we are at the messianic banquet table, where the valleys are filled in, the mountains laid low, and where God wipes away every tear. The kingdom of God is about immortality and consummation, about knowing and being known, about luxuriating in ecstatic embrace, and it is precisely these things that we dream of in our most uncensored daydreams. It is indeed towards these things that we are relentlessly propelled by every aching cell inside us. Yearning for the kingdom is written into our very DNA. Thus, in our longing we come to know the kingdom and experience advent because the fantasy we have of the great embrace is ultimately predicated on the stable scene in Bethlehem, where, finally content, a quiet, peaceful child rests on the kind of loving breast that can provide all it ever longed for.