

**First Reading: Gen 9,8-15**

**Second Reading: 1 Pet 3, 18-22**

**Gospel: Mk 1, 12-15**

**Kingdom of God- a new covenant**

“Alleluia, Praise the Lord! Zambia is a Christian Nation! Alleluia!” Do you ever hear shouts like that? Especially from some politicians who want us to think that everything is OK because we have been declared a Christian nation?

Well, it is true that there are many good Christians who are pleased with Zambia’s being called a “Christian Nation,” and that they try their very best to live up to the challenge. That’s why I think it is important to recall what the Catholic Bishops said back in 1992, responding to the “declaration” of Zambia as a “Christian Nation.” They made it very clear that “No nation is Christian by *declaration*, but only by *deeds*, especially the deeds of justice and a concern for the poor.”

I think that this is a very good thing to reflect on this first Sunday of Lent, when we are hearing in the scriptures about the Covenant that the Lord makes with the people, and how this Covenant is being fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and in his proclamation that the Kingdom of God is near at hand.

The First Reading today tells the Genesis story of the First Covenant (an “agreement” or “contract”) that God made with Noah, to protect him and his descendants. This Covenant was renewed in wonderful ways throughout the days of the Old Testament, especially with God’s promises to Abraham and Moses. We will hear stories of this during the days of Lent preparing us for our Easter celebrations.

It is in the Mark’s Gospel of today that we learn how Jesus proclaimed the Second Covenant, the establishment of the Kingdom of God. How very often in reading the Gospels do we hear about this Kingdom! And when we pray the best of our daily prayers, the Lord’s Prayer, you and I make very clear our desire that God’s Kingdom come, God’s will be done.

Someone told me once that this prayer would only be answered when we get to heaven. But that’s not what the words of the Lord’s Prayer say – we don’t wait until we get to heaven because we pray that the God’s Kingdom comes, God’s will be done, “on earth as it is in heaven”!

That means that you and I better start working very hard right now, so that the graces and blessings of this New Covenant of God’s Kingdom will be experienced in our personal lives, our families, our small Christian communities and parishes, our schools and workplaces, our government and whole society!

What will be signs of this Kingdom, this Kingdom that Jesus says in the Gospel “is close at hand”? How can we work for it? How will we recognise it?

This year, we Catholics in Zambia, and indeed throughout Africa, are very blessed because we will be praying and cooperating together to celebrate the Second African Synod this coming October. This Second African Synod will be a gathering in Rome of many bishops from all over the continent – including four bishops from Zambia. They will gather with Pope Benedict XVI to discuss and decide on how to effectively respond to a fundamental challenge to our Church: *how to be in service to reconciliation, justice and peace.*

Why is this such an important challenge? Precisely because “reconciliation, justice and peace” are very clear and necessary marks or signs of God’s Kingdom in our midst! I like the way that the preparatory document for the Second African Synod puts it: “In proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, a commitment to reconciliation, justice and peace appears to be where this Kingdom of Love is to be realised: “...the Kingdom of God...means righteousness and peace and joy brought by the Holy Spirit (*Romans 14:17ff*).” (Lineamenta #4)

During the next few Sundays of Lent, we will be reflecting on this Synod theme, both to experience better the powerful graces of the Sunday scriptures and also to prepare all of us to know what this Synod is all about and what we can expect from it.

You and I know many good things about Zambia today, but we also know many difficulties, many problems, many sad events. So Lent is a very favourable time to reflect on the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel: “Repent, and believe the Good News!” Poverty, hunger, HIV and AIDS, corruption, ecological damage, unemployment, etc., etc. – you name it! We really need some Good News, don’t we!

Just looking at the preparatory document of the Second African Synod, I can see that it is calling us to reject a tribalism that divides, calls us to a forgiveness that unites, calls us to a politics that heals, calls us to a peace that banishes violence, calls us to a conversion that makes us peacemakers (*Lineamenta* #s 67-81). Don’t we really need all of this in Zambia today?

So during this wonderful period of Lent 2009, we Christians can prepare ourselves for the coming Synod, by discussing these signs of reconciliation, justice and peace, signs of the Kingdom of God. Let’s be practical, let’s be prayerful, and yes, let’s be political. We might even move Zambia closer to being a really true “Christian Nation”!

#### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**

- What do you think it should mean to say “Zambia is a Christian Nation”?
- Have we heard much about the Second African Synod? Or about the First African Synod?
- What do you think would be real signs of the Kingdom of God here in Zambia these days?

#### **SKETCH**

Have two people kneeling together and saying out loud the Lord’s Prayer, next to another two people who are fighting each other in a violent way. When the ones praying are finished, one person stays kneeling for some more praying. But the other person gets up and goes over to two who are fighting and persuades them to peacefully reconcile.

#### **COMMUNITY PRAYERS**

- We pray, Lord, that we may recognise around us in Zambia true signs of the Kingdom of God. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, for the spirit of building a church in service to reconciliation, justice and peace. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, for good preparation for the Second African Synod by all of us Catholics in Zambia. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*