

Touching the Reign of God: Bringing theological reflection to daily life

A review by Fr. Michael Fones, O.P.

“You are not far from the kingdom of God,” Jesus tells a scribe who responds wisely to his pronouncement that love of God and love of neighbor are intimately connected. Mary Sharon Moore begins her book, *Touching the Reign of God*, by exclaiming, “I don’t want to be ‘not far’ from the kingdom of God. I don’t even want to be *near* the kingdom of God. I want to make my home in the kingdom of God and live every aspect of my life inside the reign of God.”

I have to admit when Mary Sharon invited me to review her book, I was a bit put out – I had a lot of other demands, and had read her manuscript before it was published, but this was awhile ago, and I knew I’d have to at least glance through the book again. I began reading, and quickly found myself immersed again by the second chapter, tears welling up in my eyes. I was chagrined to realize I had forgotten what a wonderful book it is.

Mary Sharon writes, “*Touching the Reign of God* is one person’s reflection on God’s grace at work in life experience. My being, my doing, and my reflecting on my experience: Every one of these elements in the life of mature Christian faith is integral to the reign of God which I, like you, have been uniquely gifted and sent to reveal.”

Touching the Reign of God is the result of Mary Sharon’s disciplined approach to reflecting on God’s presence in her life. It is the fruit of a disciple who has reflected upon God’s mercy, forgiveness, and completely ‘other-focused’ love as it is made present in ordinary events of her life. She can take an ordinary day’s event, or a commonplace object and peel back layer after layer of meaning. A door; a man both dying of cancer and coming to a new life of faith; an ambiguous, yet disturbing encounter observed on an afternoon’s walk, all are God’s response to her prayer. She writes, “I am content to let my imagination be a sandbox for the Holy Spirit. My work flows forth from this fluid environment, where all kinds of things come together—words I read, bits of conversation, a phrase from a homily, a passage from Scripture, an image from a poem, something in the news, kind deeds of strangers, daily experience.”

She carefully chronicles her response to God’s invitation to see Him in all things and all people. She strips away the carefully cultivated façade she might be tempted to present to the world with a freedom that only comes to one rooted in, and convinced of, Jesus’ undeserved love. As we follow her reflections we discover that even osteoporosis takes on meaning in the life of one who “abides in” Jesus. That same meticulous probing of reality also reveals new

freshness in the words of Scripture that may have become stale to us because of our lack of attentiveness.

Mary Sharon helps the reader realize that there is a wealth of meaning in our lives if we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and precious time to give to the process of reflection. She invites us into her life of prayer, and through her sometimes heart-breaking stories, demonstrates that prayers are answered, especially prayers that pull us out of ourselves, “let me see your face,” “Lord, whatever you would have me hear, let me hear it.”

This is not a book for anyone seeking familiar platitudes. Her poetic language does not shy away from the profound insight that whoever would enter, and not merely touch, the reign of God, must be intimately united to Christ crucified. It is not an easy road, and few take it because of what the Lord reveals to us in the silence of prayer and reflection. Mary Sharon is often quite forthcoming with her own weakness, revealed to her by Jesus in her life of prayer. “I play at practicing humility, I secretly admit, and that is no humility at all. In those rare moments when I set aside my rightful claim and defer to others, I am quietly pleased with myself for this subtle and noble gesture. But I miss the point entirely. Being pleased, even quietly pleased, with my small acts of humility is an affront to the One who is Extreme Humility. My hollow virtue is my defeat...” At the same time, though, Mary Sharon finds – and invites us to discover - respite in our Lord and Teacher. “Crucified between two thieves, Jesus in all humility is the Good Thief, stealing from me my debt of sin, a debt too great for me to bear. And more, he steals from me my identity before God, my self-imposed identity as sinner, betrayer, imposter, pretender to greatness. And he, true Lover, gives me a new identity: his own.”

This marvelous little book is wondrously, utterly, Christ-centered, and flows from Mary Sharon’s deep, personal love for Jesus. But it is a love, she knows, that comes with a price. “My share in Christ’s priestly mission requires that I go with him, faithfully, willingly, lovingly, into the caverns of human anguish, so that his grace can be more fully unleashed to penetrate the parched and broken terrain of human experience. St. Paul is right: We live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and was raised. My outpouring of self in his name is a fruit of my baptism, just as Jesus’ self offering was a fruit of his baptism.”

These reflections stir up a longing in the reader’s heart for a deeper intimacy with our Creator, and she offers practical steps for us to take at the end of each essay. She provides simple, yet penetrating reflection questions that invite us to touch the reign of God in our own lives.