The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.” This saying of our Lord must have come as quite a shock to the Jewish chief priests and elders he was speaking to: “How could he say such a thing!?”, they may well have thought; “The kingdom of God is ours by birthright!” Indeed, Christ was effectively announcing a change: no longer would membership in the Kingdom be determined by genealogy, circumcision, or any other natural claim; rather, such membership would occur through supernatural grace.

It was at baptism, then, that we first became members of the kingdom of God, having been transferred there by the Lord himself from the kingdom of darkness into which we were born. This is one important reason why we baptize infants: every person is born pagan, into the domain of the prince of this world; hence, the Church even includes exorcism in the prayers of baptism, to wrest the child from all claims of the devil and place him or her securely in the hands of our loving God. Baptism then also pours God’s grace into our souls.

And that grace, which is a sharing in the divine life, is what justifies us or makes us right with God. Through it we receive adoption as sons and a new destiny. We may well lose our claim on that destiny or hope through subsequent sin, but the Lord gives us the sacrament of confession, also, to restore what is lost after baptism. When we confess our mortal sins in kind and number, with contrition, God’s divine life – again, what we call grace – is restored within our souls. And that grace enables us to live as he commands.

That means grace is what makes it possible for us to bear fruit that befits the kingdom of God – that fruit about which Christ spoke so startling to the chief priests and the elders. Many of them quite possibly would have thought in that moment: “But I am bearing fruit; I’m a good person; I follow the law to a tee!” Many people who habitually live in mortal sin think the same. “I’m a good person! I give to charity! And besides, I haven’t killed anyone!” Such are the self-justifications of many; but we can only be justified by God.

The Church has always taught that no amount of good works will save us if they do not flow from and return back to God’s grace. We cannot save ourselves. If we are not right with God, the good that we do has no eternal value. Nowhere in the gospels does our Lord say that he will examine our curriculum vitae or resumés at our judgment. How imperative it is that we strive always to be in a right relationship with him! Only within that right relationship – when we are living in his grace – can our good have saving value.

But a new question may arise for us: How can we know if we are in the state of grace? For most, a lot has happened since baptism, so to speak. How can we be sure that we are right with God? Answering this question may seem tricky, especially for those who tend toward laxity or to the other extreme, scrupulosity. But the resolution of our doubt is rather straightforward: we can know if we are right with the Lord by our sincerity. If our consciences do not convict us, then we may presume that we are in the state of grace.

But that sincerity also extends beyond whether or not we sense that we have a hit against us. It extends also to the way we live out our life of grace: Do I go to confession regularly, and especially, right away, if I should fall into a mortal sin? Do I receive Holy Communion worthily and with devotion? Do I strive to pray every day, even when that prayer is dry and seemingly fruitless? Am I trying to do good for my family and my community – not to gain the accolades of others, but to please the Lord?

Our feelings can be tumultuous and unreliable, even in our relationship with God. But if we can recognize sincerity of heart toward him, then we have a reliable indicator of our relationship with him. And this can lead us, in spite of our feelings, to that peace of which St. Paul spoke in the
second reading: “Have no anxiety at all,” he said, “but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Therefore, shortly, as at every Mass, I will say “lift up your hearts”. Is my heart lifted up to the Lord? Is it upright with respect to him? Or do I need to clean house, with his help, by making a good confession and getting back on track? The most important thing we can do here on this earth is to live and die in his grace. It is the only way that bears fruit that will last. I warmly invite anyone who has been away from confession, or otherwise needs to make a good confession, to contact me and let me help. Our good Jesus invites us all to his Kingdom.