

Last Week

Last week I posed the question, who has the *one* voice we should follow? I said that many of us drag our past around like a big old sack of rocks – rocks of regret and rejection. There is a voice that speaks to us who carry those sacks of stones. He says, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” “My sheep hear my voice,” He says. His disciples know him as their shepherd; the Lord is my shepherd. He is Lord because he is Christ the Victor – the Lord of power and might.

He will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death and we will fear no evil for his rod and staff – his weapons – provide security. But there is more to it. It is about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. He is the rightful king who will equip us to join him in the campaign to liberate people from false rulers and leaders, and enter his kingdom.

Vision of the Heavenly Kingdom

What is his kingdom like? It is a heavenly kingdom, yet we really can't know what either heaven or hell actually is like; even the Bible doesn't tell us the details. But we do know that heaven is where and when all things are under God's perfect ruling authority. In word-pictures Revelation gives us an approximation of what heaven and hell are like.

Revelation 21 provides several images: 1) The first heaven and earth (fallen into sin as we know it) will be replaced by a new creation; and the sea – symbolic of chaos, lawlessness, fearful existence – will be no more. Jesus is on the throne as king over all, after having conquered his enemies – meaning defeat of the devil and casting him to eternal punishment along with all who followed him, and finally rescuing a people who belong with him.¹ God is making all things new. 2) God is preparing to dwell with his people. Here at the closing of the Bible it says that God intensely longs to be reunited with humanity, even as a bride and groom long to be together. [That's why we see the Holy City, God's people the church, prepared for him as a Bride adorned for her husband.] In the beginning we turned away from our Creator and God, and ever since, God has been at work bringing us back to him. At the end of time, God recreates heaven and earth – making all things new – so that we can finally live together as one family. This is the story told throughout the Bible of God, the earth, heaven, good and evil, and us.

The Kingdom of God is the single, continuous action of God to restore all that was destroyed by the Fall. At the incarnation of Jesus, the King landed in enemy territory. Through his temptation and miracles, Jesus of Nazareth delivered a series of defeats to the devil. By his blood, Christ rescued a people to be his own, and his resurrection dealt a crippling blow to the powers of evil.² Jesus' death and resurrection makes it possible for us to begin to experience that kingdom as members of the family of God. And we can be the presence of God for others when they can't feel that presence themselves, or don't know of God's kingdom.

There are still many knees that have not bowed nor tongues confessed to the Kingship of Jesus (Phil. 2:10-11). Until that happens, his Kingdom is not complete. There is still work to be done before Jesus returns to replace the kingdoms of this world. His Kingdom has begun, is a sure thing, but is “not-yet.”³ That is why at each communion we say, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” [My sins are forgiven, yet do I still sin, while I look to a day when all sin is erased forever.]

Our idea of the afterlife or heaven or hell will shape the way we prepare ourselves for it. If there is no afterlife then no preparation will make any difference – “eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die.” If everyone will automatically attain heaven then, likewise, no preparation is necessary – by definition everyone is already saved. If you believe that one enters heaven by destroying the enemies of God, then you will be headed for a life of animosity with those who do not believe as you do. If, however, you believe in the biblical worldview then you will desire to join Jesus' family, enter his kingdom, and prepare yourself for

¹Don Allsman, *Jesus Cropped from the Picture*, (The Urban Ministry Institute, Wichita, KS, 2009), 32-33.

²Ibid, 31-32.

³Ibid, 32.

heaven as he directs. That preparation means understanding God's purposes, as explained in the Bible, submitting yourself to Christ as Lord, and joining others to extend his kingdom.

You may not be too thrilled with the picture Revelation presents of heaven: people just hanging around praising God in Christ for all eternity. But it makes sense when "the Kingdom of God is the progressive expansion of God's life-giving rule over creation, until all things are under his perfect ruling authority."⁴ Looking to Christ as central to life and his praise as its most important activity makes sense in the reality of the biblical worldview. It doesn't mean we stop making a living here, but it surely impacts how we go about making a living. Making Christ central and praising him tends to guard one from falling prey to the error of substituting an earthly paradise for the new heaven and earth that God promises. Earthly paradises either become self-centered pursuits of comfort, personality cults, or attempts to build some perceived version of heaven, relying on human means, human paradigms, and not much on biblical witness. Either way leads to destructive living. When governments try engineer an earthly paradise history shows that they never get utopia, but always dystopia. When people are forced into the earthly paradise it always ends badly.

[Interestingly, the Christians to whom John wrote Revelation were suffering intense persecution by zealous advocates of Roman Civil Religion. In the Roman province of Asia during the last seven years of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, Christians were singled out for oppressive treatment, accused of sedition, of atheism, and all sorts of evil deeds. Many were imprisoned and many suffered martyrdom. God's kingdom is so often perceived as a threat to the kingdoms of this earth. We are engaged in a great struggle between good and evil. The Evil One has his wiles that deceive us into siding with him. He disguises his aims with seemingly good and godly programs and ideas, born through the good intentions of humans. Yet humans are still fallen creatures, prone to sin and pride, so Christians must continually call our attention back to God's kingdom.]

Christians will seek to live with God's help and guidance and invite others to join. In keeping with God's ways, we invite, we do not compel, people to join the kingdom of God. At the same time we realize that although God's kingdom on earth began with Jesus it is not fully come and will not be taken by storm through our efforts. In this "in-between time" the Holy Spirit animates Christians and allows them hear Jesus' voice. Through the Holy Spirit we discern the spirits of the times, stay fixed on Jesus our true leader, and live into the values of the heavenly kingdom. Remember his command, "Love one another, even as I have loved you." This is a primary value of God's kingdom.

Values of the Kingdom

Jesus said this to his disciples as he prepared to go out to his arrest and crucifixion. He also said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." God is glorified by Jesus self-sacrifice to atone for our sins. This is the kind of love God has for humans and is an example of the love he asks us to share. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

"See those Christians, how they love one another..." it was the comment of the early years of Christianity. In the Roman Empire life was for most people, tough, sometimes brutal, nasty, and short. Beyond family or clan there was little concern for the well-being of others. Mmm...

A number of years ago sociologist Rodney Stark, wrote a fascinating book in which he describes how Christianity survived and grew in ancient Rome. One reason was the Christians' higher survival rates during epidemics. He goes on to describe how Christian social networks fostered their survival, while pagans died at a higher rate. Part of the irony is that the admonition to "love one another" and to visit and pray for the sick, turned out to have practical consequences. More Christians survived the epidemics because of brothers and sisters in Christ who cared for them, and more Christians developed immunity to illness because of their exposure by way of caring for the sick.⁵

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Those of us who proclaim ourselves followers of Christ have our work cut out for us. His commandment is simple enough to hear and understand, and deeply challenging to live consistently. Communities of faith,

⁴Ibid, 32.

⁵Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (1996, Princeton Univ. Press), 73-94.

along with individuals, regularly stumble and falter in living it out.⁶ It ought to humble us and propel us to the foot of the cross, where our failures and weakness were laid to rest. It ought to encourage us to turn to Jesus in prayer, asking for the power of the Holy Spirit to teach us to love one another, and what all that means.

[If it is such a challenge for us, how can we expect an entire nation to love one another? Here is the irony with our present day: even as the role of Christian religion has diminished in our society, and individual morality has regressed, there has grown an expectation that government will be compassionate and loving. So as individual responsibility wanes, government control rises. Yet there is no government large enough, pervasive enough to control an immoral populace. In attempting to do so governments will necessarily become more intrusive and oppressive and will (consciously or unconsciously) usurp the place of God. That is why all governments – all kingdoms – of this world are seen in the Bible as needing to be placed under the dominion of God.]

Who Belongs in the Kingdom

So, who belongs in the kingdom of God? Many of us have heard jokes about entering heaven – who belongs and who does not. There's this one:

One day, a teacher, a garbage collector, and a preacher all die and go to heaven. Saint Peter is there and is having a bad day since heaven is getting crowded. When they get to the gate, Saint Peter says that there will be a test to get into heaven: they each will have to answer a single question.

To the teacher, he says, "What was the name of the ship that crashed into the iceberg and sank with over half its passengers and was the worst disaster in maritime history?"

The teacher thinks for a second, and then replies: "That would be the Titanic, right?" Saint Peter waves him through.

Saint Peter turns to the garbage collector, and, figuring that heaven doesn't really need someone who picks up trash, decides to make the question a little harder: "How many people died on the ship?"

The garbage collector guesses: "1, 513."

"That happens to be right; go ahead."

Then Saint Peter turns to the preacher: "Name them."

It's good for a laugh, but like so many of these jokes, this one misses the main point of the gospel: entry into heaven is not based upon *our* holiness, but upon *God's* holiness. A holiness God will share with us through Jesus.

Probably the biggest challenge to understanding the truth of the gospel today is not that so many are concerned about making the grade to enter heaven. Rather it is more probable that many people, if not most, believe that they will enter heaven just because they are good or okay and God wouldn't want to leave anyone out. Indeed, how many folks these days simply believe that they deserve to get into heaven? Instead of justification by faith in Christ's atonement, we have those who simply believe in justification by death.

But the fact remains, as we learned from the Bible readings last week, Jesus has the voice that opens the gates of heaven. His sheep know his voice and through him they enter into God's almighty presence, with the angels. There will be a final judgment and it will have to do with hearing Christ's voice and following him. This was a front-line experience for those first disciples and it still is for us today.

There is this strange story in Acts 11 (the first church history) in which the apostle Peter explains to the other believers why he crossed the barrier that existed between Jews and Gentiles to eat with them. He told the other Jewish-Christians about his vision from God that showed him that all foods were okay to eat – not just the kosher. Then how he was instructed by the Spirit to go with men sent from Caesarea to the home of a Gentile who had been told by an angel that Peter "...will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved." And by golly when Peter began to speak to this man and his household about salvation in Jesus the Holy Spirit came on them as it had the first disciples. So Peter concludes, "...if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

⁶Mary Austin, "Is America a Christian Nation?" *lection@lectionaryscripturenates.com*, April 26, 2010.

When the other disciples heard this they had no objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Do we discount or gloss over these accounts of spiritual direction? Is it just something that happened back then? Maybe we've gotten away from such spiritual insight because we have so much more input from other sources in our lives. Maybe we try to rely so much on our own resources that we don't call on God's. Here's Peter reaching out to Gentiles because, along with his impetuous nature, he is now able to see what God is doing beyond his own limited expectations. Peter has finally learned that when you call someone "the Christ, the Son of God," you don't go on to tell him what to do (remember "get behind me, Satan"?). Nor do you deny him when it gets inconvenient. Instead you listen. You feed his sheep -- and since it's his flock, you let him decide who the sheep are. God was and is calling people from all races and nations and walks of life to enter his kingdom. This is not something we can engineer -- if we try we'll most likely miss the kingdom of God. This happens when the Spirit calls people in and the Spirit prompts us to invite them in.

When you discern the presence of the Holy Spirit, you set self aside and follow. God's loving, creative power is nothing new -- it has been there from before the beginning and will continue after the end (or if you prefer, in eternity which has no beginning or end). This same power makes all things new: so we can hope. Can God do a new thing with me? ...with you? ...with us?

We *can* dream great dreams. We *can* be encouraged to aim for a new life in Jesus. We *can* love as he loves because he offers us his power to do it.