

Fire On Earth

These past weeks, as we have listened to what Jesus is saying, to what he is doing, on his long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, we have heard Jesus encourage us to freedom, to a radical trust in God.

We have watched as Jesus cures the sick, restores outcasts to the community, heals the broken. In short, these last weeks have been all about coming together, restoring, and making whole; whether from the point of view of the individual or the broader community.

So today's lesson is quite a shock. It is a complete about face of all that has come before.....or at least, at first glance, it appears that way. But if we look deeply, perhaps we will come to see that division and fire and pain are often roadways to unity and peace and joy.

When Jesus speaks of dividing families, he is speaking, at the core, of allegiance. To whom will you give yours? To whom will I give mine?

Those prophets and martyrs who are remembered in the Letter to the Hebrews prophesied and witnessed their allegiance to God; and rejected allegiance to their States, to their Kings, to the powers and principalities of their day. Flogged and stoned, sawn in half, outcast or executed, they paid the price of allegiance to God when the powers and principalities insisted such allegiance belonged only to them.

So many of the early martyrs' families begged them to just go along to get along, to forget this nonsense about allegiance to God. But they would not. Because they could not.

The sharp wedge between allegiance to God and allegiance to the powers of this world changed when Christianity became the official religion of the empire. The Roman Emperor Constantine had a vision of the cross leading him to a military victory, and, as a result, in 312 AD, he ordered that Christianity would not only be tolerated, but officially embraced. While I am sure that much good came of that decision; official persecutions stopped, and a wide swath of Europe and

Asia were introduced to the gospel, there is also much to regret about the marriage of church and state that happened so long ago.

The sharp division Jesus drew between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world became muted and dulled; with a sense that perhaps there is no difference at all between the two. This identity of interests between Church and State may have reached its pinnacle in our country in the 1940's, 1950's, and early 1960's, when we had, in the popular mind, this intimate connection between God and Country. "Mom, God and apple pie", so the saying went.

It's no wonder those were the hay days of life in our mainline churches. This church, and all the others, was full, week in and week out.

Yet as the 60's moved into the 70's and 80's, with disillusionment spreading in our nation over Viet Nam, over street protests, over racial strife, over corruption in government, the disillusionment so many felt for our secular institutions hit just as strongly at our churches. And over these decades we have seen a decline in those who stake their claim with us. And I wonder if so many left because the message of the gospel got all too entangled with the message of the powers of this world.

And yet, it seems a new breeze is blowing. One that is pushing we Christians to reexamine to whom, and in what, we place our allegiance. We Christians are coming to see, as the martyrs of old saw, that God asks different things from us; different from the demands of country or company or even family and friends.

We are, these days, coming back to Jesus; in all his radical, uncompromising, rootedness in the kingdom of God. We are throwing off the idols we have made and worshipped; idols of success and celebrity and security and patriotism and youthfulness and prestige. We are throwing off these idols, and coming to believe in the Almighty God who is all in all; who holds us gently in the palm of his hand, who beckons us to live lives, here and now of the kingdom.

I am convinced that this shift we are experiencing is not something we are responsible for. What God did for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is doing for us once again as we are invited to throw off our modern idol worship and to throw on, once again, the cloak of the grace of God.

A key part of this shift is reclaiming the “now, but not yet” tension of God’s kingdom coming into our world. This “now, but not yet” tension IS our life in Christ.

Those who claim the Kingdom is already here in its fullness are easy to spot: they are wrapped tightly in this Creed or that flag, holding a sign that says: “My way or the highway!”

Just so, those who are convinced the kingdom will never come are also easy to spot. They are out accumulating things as the be all and the end all of life; hoping to fulfill the modern mantra: “Whoever dies with the most toys wins!”

Instead, it is in the tension, of “now, but not yet”, that we live our Christian faith. Straining forward toward the full coming of the Kingdom, yet, straining forward in this world.

While “forces of violence and greed pull us back toward an age that is passing away, the love of Christ summons us forward to embrace” justice and reconciliation: the fruit of God’s Kingdom. [Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 45].

This is the tension Jesus expresses in today’s gospel. “Now, but not yet.”

The fire Jesus announces is a fire that purifies. What the martyrs knew, what we know, is that when we put our allegiance in Christ, that which was divided is made whole; that which was deformed is made whole; that which was dead is now alive!

We are each of us on a great journey. God, once more, is rescuing humanity from our love of idols; God, once more, is bringing us home.

I leave you with this, from the Letter to the Hebrews:

“Keep your eyes on Jesus who both began and finished the race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed --- that exhilarating finish in and with God!”

May we too live in the “now, but not yet.” Straining forward, with total allegiance, into the new world that is, even today, being born.

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