

The Reign of God

"The thing that disappoints me about the Southern white church is that it spends all of its time dealing with Jesus after the cross, instead of dealing with Jesus before the cross. You didn't do a thing but preach about the death of Jesus. If that were the heart of Christianity, all God had to do was drop him down on Friday, and let them kill him, and then yank him back up again on Easter Sunday. That's all you hear. You don't hear so much about his three years of teaching that man's religion is revealed in the love of his fellow man. He who says he loves God and hates his fellow man is a liar, and the truth is not in him. That is what offended the leaders of Jesus' own established church as well as the colonial authorities from Rome. That's why they put him up there.... There is a world of disparity between the idealism of Jesus and the practices of men. But Jesus is not crazy. We are crazy. The church has not formally denounced the Sermon on the Mount. It has merely let it slide. I want to deal with Jesus before the cross. I don't give a damn what happened to him after the cross."

Vernon Johns

I love this reading by Vernon Johns, ????. I share in his disappointment with churches that spend all of their time dealing with Jesus after the cross, instead of before the cross. Today, Easter Sunday, is traditionally understood as the high point of the Christian liturgical year. The empty tomb on the 3rd day after his crucifixion, the mysterious appearance of a stranger on the road to Emmaus, a stranger the disciples didn't recognize as Jesus until he broke bread with them, the risen Christ who invited the disciple Thomas, doubting Thomas, to put his fingers into his wounds so that his doubts about who he was might be put to rest, these are the proof texts upon which most of the Christian church bases its celebration of Easter and the resurrection. But what of the life of Jesus before the cross? What are we to make of those who hailed him as the Messiah, the Christ, before Easter? How are we to understand the appeal of this carpenter's son who gathered disciples, who inspired and empowered them to leave their homes and proclaim the presence of the reign of God?

Didn't his followers experience the transforming power of his message before the resurrection?

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What do you suppose happened to his followers who were not in Jerusalem the day he was crucified? Did the sun stop for them, too? Did the program of free healing and not shunning sinners they were practicing cease to have meaning when Jesus died?

I don't think so. I think they kept the faith, the faith of Jesus:
by continuing to eat with all regardless of their status;
by healing the sick;
by comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable;
by visiting the imprisoned;
by feeding the hungry.

This is not a new idea, a new gospel, an idea unique to me or to this time. For centuries this alternative to the orthodox understanding has been preached and proclaimed. It is a Christianity whose proof text is not John 3:16 but Matthew 25:

"You will have my Father's blessing; come, enter and possess the kingdom For when I was hungry, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home, when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help, when in prison you visited me."

Then the righteous will reply,

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, a stranger and took you home, or naked and clothed you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and come to visit you?"

Then the king will answer,

"I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me."

It is a Christianity that emphasizes the sermon on the mount over apocalyptic warnings. It is a Christianity that seeks to worship God rather than the messenger of God. It is a Christianity that has been preached and proclaimed whenever and wherever men and women have been free to follow the claims of reason and conscience.

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It is a version of Christianity whose vision of the future holds out the promise of a day when justice shall roll down like waters on all instead of a day when the apocalypse brings death and despair to non-believers.

The scholar John Dominic Crossan makes a distinction between sapiential and apocalyptic eschatology.

An apocalyptic eschatology believes that a cataclysmic divine intervention will restore peace and justice in a disordered world. Accordingly, those who hold this world view preach of the terrible things that will occur to those who don't conform to their sense of what God requires of us. An example is Jerry Falwell's recent claim that the September 11th attacks were a consequence of our wickedness and immorality of our times. This kind of thinking is all through the Hebrew Scripture. The Jewish Exile to Babylon was understood as a divine intervention to punish Israel for worshipping false Gods.

This was the view of John the Baptist, who lived on a diet of honey and locusts in the wilderness, who angered Herod's wife by condemning her wickedness, who urged repentance in order to avoid God's wrath.

But the eschatology of Jesus, Crossan suggests, was of an entirely different sort than that of John the Baptist or the pre-exile Jewish prophets. Crossan calls it a "Sapiential eschatology." The word sapiential comes from the Latin word for wisdom. A sapiential eschatology emphasizes knowing how to live so that the love of God is made visible here and now. Crossan writes, "In apocalyptic eschatology we are waiting for God to act, but in sapiential eschatology God is waiting for us to act.The former is the message of John the Baptist, the latter that of Jesus."

Gandhi is an examples of one who emphasized knowing how to live here and now so that God's love would be made visible here and now.

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I believe this is the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the realm of God that Jesus constantly proclaimed. Jesus manifested the power and love of God by healing freely, by not being afraid to touch those his fellow Jews were afraid to touch. Jesus manifested the power and love of God by ignoring distinctions of status and gender and freely eating and traveling with people of all types. Jesus manifested the power and love of God by giving away all that he had, by forsaking the security and advantage of staying in his home town. Liberated by his example and his message, his followers took his message of love and hope far and wide, without a change of clothes, without a knapsack, without even a stick to protect themselves from wild dogs and other animals.

This is the gospel, this is the good news, that we, with God's help, can manifest the power and love of God in our time, today, in this community, in our homes, in our places of employment, in the halls of government and at the gates of our cities. This is the good news that Jesus brought his disciples and followers so long ago that is just as true today as it was back then: That we have the power to usher in the reign of God right now. That we have the power to create what is possible for us here and now on earth, just as it is in heaven, that is to say, just as it is in our wildest dreams.

I believe that I am part of something larger than myself, a natural and all-encompassing system beyond my understanding or control, yet a system upon which I can nonetheless reliably depend. In the midst of the mystery of existence I have, in the words of the 19th century German theologian Fredrick Schleiermacher, experienced a "revelation of the Infinite in the finite. I have felt, as he wrote, "that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one...that our being and living is a being and living in and through God."

The key element in my faith is not theory but experience. Religion is not something you do. It is not social action or community service, no matter how noble, far reaching or effective it may. Religion is also not something you think. It is not a theory or a doctrine. Religion is an experience, something you feel. As the theologian Anselm wrote, "He who has not experienced will not understand."

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Again, in the words of Schleiermacher, "Jesus was so aware of God, so attuned to God, that his awareness of God became the dominant principle in his life and thus controlled every aspect of his behavior. From this perspective, Christ redeems not by his sacrifice, his moral teachings, or the uniqueness of his person. Jesus redeems by making it possible for the consciousness of God to become the dominant principle in our lives, thus allowing us to resist doing what we know is wrong. Christ is able to implant this consciousness in us because he manifested so completely and perfectly one in whom the consciousness of God was fully and completely realized." {Pause}

When I read the Gospels, even the truncated gospel of Thomas Jefferson, stripped of all miracles and ending when the stone is rolled up to the tomb, what makes Jesus special to me is my sense of the degree to which he was conscious of the holy, conscious of God.

The good news that Jesus brought is that anyone of us can enter that realm, that nothing we have done can prevent us from having the consciousness of God become the dominant factor in our lives. When we experience this connection, this sense of being part of something greater than ourselves, this sense of participating in the infinite through the finite events of our daily life, we are liberated. With that freedom, we are able to confront the fears and worries that so often imprison us and deaden us and keep us from fully living

When Jesus invites us to follow him, we are being invited to follow him in having the consciousness of God become the most important part of our life. When we are faithful to that call, we enter the realm of God, the realm of the holy.

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The miracle of Easter is that the message of Jesus survived his death. The Romans crucified him in order to humiliate and discredit him. They hoped to bury his message along with his body. They hoped to intimidate and disperse his followers. In short, they hoped to annihilate him and everything he stood for. The miracle of Easter is that against all the odds, his message, his gospel, the good news that he proclaimed, still lives. The miracle of Easter is that so many of us still believe, despite the horrors of history, despite the crucifixion, that the power of God's love can be made manifest here and now and that nothing can stop its unfolding.

Jesus died, not so that we would be assured of eternal life, but so that we would be liberated of the fear of death. We don't fear death so much as we fear meaningless lives. We don't fear death or even suffering so much as we fear dying or suffering in vain. Jesus did not die in vain. His purpose, his mission, his call was taken up by his followers. His life had lasting significance and meaning just as does the life of everyone who has taken up his struggle, his cross.

God's love is manifested whenever we care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. It is manifested whenever we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters. It is manifested whenever God's love shines through our eyes and God's care is delivered through our hands. It is manifested in these words of the 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker,

We look to the future, a future to be made
A church whose creed is truth,
whose worship is love:

A society full of industry, wisdom,
and the poetry of life:

A state with unity among all,
with freedom for each.

A church without tyranny,
a society without want,
a state without oppression,
a world with no war.

Shall this ever become fact?

History says, No; Human Nature says, Yes.

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A society without want? A state without oppression? A world without war?

Can you believe this could ever become fact?

It's difficult isn't it?

But is it any harder than believing in the resurrection?

In the spirit of Jesus, for the love of God, for the love of humankind, I invite you to believe. I invite you to live as if what is possible in heaven, that is to say, your wildest dreams, could be achieved here on earth.

May God's will be done.