

Good Friday, 2017

Several years ago when my wife and I were living in Houston, a family we knew there suffered a misfortune which many parents fear: one of their children was killed in an automobile crash. The family was devastated, as you might expect, but the mother was especially torn up and never recovered fully. She tried to console herself, however, with the belief that her dead child was now in Heaven and able to look down upon the family, while at the same time remaining in some kind of communion with them. In holding this belief she was reflecting centuries of Christian tradition which postulates a heavenly sphere to which the souls of the departed ascend after death and live in perpetual bliss. This belief is suggested by St. John the Divine in the final chapters of his Revelation. It is celebrated by St. Augustine in his City of God, where he envisions the heavenly city, a spiritual counterpart to the earthly city of Jerusalem. This portrait of heaven is expanded in the poet Dante's Divine Comedy, where he describes the pilgrim's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and, finally Heaven, where he is ultimately privileged to see the Beatific Vision of God himself. All of these works and many more like them reflect a belief in a happy ending to our journey through life, or to what airline personnel call "our final destination."

Because this belief is so widespread among Christians and even people who profess no religious belief whatsoever, it is perhaps surprising that Jesus says so little about what happens after we die. He does talk some about resurrection and eternal life however, especially in St. John's Gospel. For example, He responds to some lawyers who ask whose wife a woman will be in the resurrection who has married seven brothers in succession, all of whom have died. Jesus replies that in the resurrection there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage. Perhaps the closest thing Jesus says about life after death is his statement that he goes to prepare a place for the disciples, that where he is they may be also. But even this is not necessarily a reference to post-death reality; it could just as well apply to next week or next year. Jesus appears to have been more interested in the present than the future. Nearly all his references to the Kingdom of Heaven are in the present tense, not the future.

When Jesus referred to Heaven, which he did often, he generally phrased it as the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God as it appears in some of the Gospels. Right now I will speak of it exclusively as the Kingdom of Heaven even though both terms are used interchangeably. We learn that Jesus began his ministry preaching the Kingdom of Heaven. All that he did and said was intended to reveal God's Kingdom here on earth. However, that is not how most of his contemporaries understood it. To the sick he was the man who could cure illness, to the blind he was the guy who could restore sight, to the lepers he was someone who could cure leprosy, to the crippled he was a man who could restore physical wholeness. He could change water into wine according to some people, although St. John tells us that the whole point of that was to reveal Jesus' identity as God. Jesus could even walk on water or raise Lazarus from the dead, and how about feeding 5,000 people with two small fish and five loaves of bread! This is what people saw, this is what they talked about, this is what they remembered, as we do today.

The idea of God's kingdom being a present reality simply did not occur to most people. Even Jesus' disciples, the men who spent two or three years in his company, failed to catch what he was getting at. When he asked them whether they got the point of the feeding of the 5,000, they

shook their heads. The closest they came to it was when Jesus asked them who people thought he was.

They replied that some thought he was Elijah, some thought he was a prophet. He then asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Peter was right, but soon afterward he showed that he did not understand what that meant. Jesus said that he had to go to Jerusalem and be tried and put into the hands of wicked men. Peter replied that he would never let that happen, yet it was Jesus' intent to be tried, found guilty, and be crucified, something that made absolutely no sense to Peter. It helps our understanding of the Gospels if we see them as revelations of the Kingdom of Heaven. For example, Jesus tells a story about a wealthy farmer who hires workers for the day at an agreed-upon wage. As the day progresses, it is obvious to the farmer that he needs more workers to get the job done, so he hires a second crew. Again later that day he hires still more, and an hour before quitting time he hires more yet again. At the end of the day he pays them all the same. The first-hired object: this is not fair. Right. But the needs of the last-hired are the same as those of the first-hired, and so they are all paid the same. That is how the Kingdom of Heaven works. It turns our ideas of fairness upside down: pay is determined by our needs, not by our accomplishments. Can you imagine how would that work in today's world?

Similarly, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount he declares that the Kingdom of Heaven is for the poor, whereas we consider poverty to be something avoided or abolished. Wealth is the goal for many of us. Yet St. Francis, a devout follower of Jesus, deliberately gave up his wealth and embraced what he called Lady Poverty in order to imitate the life of Christ. Jesus calls the poor blessed or happy, and some surveys find that the poor tend to be happier than the rich.

The Kingdom of Heaven, then, is full of surprises and paradox. We recall Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as he contemplated his future. In prayer he asked his heavenly Father: "If it be thy will, take this cup from me." The cup refers to what he must face: his betrayal by Judas, his arrest, his trial and condemnation, his scourging and crucifixion, not to mention his being abandoned by all his disciples except his holy mother Mary and the beloved disciple. Jesus continued in prayer, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." Where have we heard that before?

Why, of course: the prayer that you and I have known as far back as we can remember. It says in part, "Our Father in Heaven, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." In other words, we declare that Heaven is where God's will is done, and on Good Friday it is God's will that Jesus endure the trial and crucifixion. That does not sound like our idea of Heaven; it sounds much more like Hell, but Jesus believes that it is his Father's will that he endure this torture and that the Good Friday experience is on this occasion the Kingdom of Heaven, because it is where God's will is being done on earth. Horrifying? Absolutely, Shocking? Without question. Necessary? Evidently. Nothing.

Jesus has said or done until now has persuaded anyone of the degree to which God loves his creation. Even his disciples don't get the message, so Jesus spells it out when he tells his disciples that the highest form of love is to lay down one's life for someone else. Again, while defining his role as Good Shepherd he declares, "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the

sheep,” to which he adds, “I am the Good Shepherd.” So, on Good Friday Jesus the Good Shepherd demonstrates what God’s love means in practice.

What about the inspiring vision of St. John the Divine or the glorious portrait of Heaven in The City of God, or Dante’s spectacular vision of Paradise? They look to the future, but Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven in the present tense; I cannot recall him ever saying that the Kingdom would not be real until after we die. God’s Kingdom is here and now when we gather to take part in Holy Communion: The Kingdom of Heaven is with you, he says, in you, among you. When we come to the altar to share the Blessed Sacrament, we hear the words, “The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven. The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.” If that is not Heaven, what is?

And what of the future? As St. Francis was hoeing in his garden he was asked what he would do if he had only five minutes left to live. He replied that he would keep on hoeing. Similarly, Henry David Thoreau, who is best known for his book about living by Walden Pond in Concord, MA, was asked while he was on his death bed whether he was ready for the next world. He replied, “One world at a time.” Good advice. St. Paul puts it a bit differently in his letter to the Romans. He says, in effect, that if Jesus experienced the mystery of death on Good Friday, then we should have nothing to fear. If God is for us, he asks, who can be against us? Who indeed? Thousands of others have followed the example of Jesus the Good Shepherd and laid down their lives for others. Some are doing so today. The secular world calls them heroes, the church calls them saints and martyrs, I call them good shepherds.

Two hundred years ago the English poet John Keats published his poem “Ode On A Grecian Urn,” which ends with the words:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty.

That is all ye know and all ye need to know.

I conclude these remarks by adapting Keats’ magnificent verses with a few changes of my own:

The Kingdom of Heaven occurs on Good Friday

The Kingdom of Heaven is doing God’s will.

The Kingdom of Heaven is here.

That is all you know - and - all you need to know.