

“Joy Is at Hand”

“Your kingdom come! Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven,” we pray; but when will our prayer be answered?

When Jesus’ disciples asked that question; he replied
“It’s not for you to speculate; instead, go to all nations.”
As it turns out, that task may be how Jesus answers their question 2000 years ago - and our prayer today.

If you are still confused on the subject, it may be due to the rather baffling array of Jesus’ statements about the coming ‘kingdom’ recorded by the Gospel writers.

Sometimes it sounds like it is in the future, and at others it clearly refers to the present.

And yet - in spite of Jesus’ warnings about speculation - some people believe the bible clearly outlines the future, speculating with gusto as to what that future time line is.

They see history as something like a movie that’s already made, divinely predetermined.
Already filmed and edited, it is, “in the can,” so to speak.... We are just watching it play.
And... the bible gives them the code to know what to expect as the lifelong movie unwinds.

Others... myself among them - though born and thoroughly indoctrinated in the former approach - believe that neither the bible nor Jesus’ teachings are intended to provide us a timeline for the future.

In our view, God’s creation is maturing with both freedom and limits: as if under the watchful eye of a caring parent.

So, what we find in the bible and teachings of Jesus, is not a schematic diagram of the future, but instead something far more valuable... warnings & promises.

In warning the people about future consequences of bad behaviour the greatest hope of the prophet is that his predictions of calamity won’t come true.

A mother warns her rock-throwing children:
“Watch out! Somebody’s going to lose an eye!”
The children heed her warning, no-one loses an eye and her warning is successful... even though what she “predicted” failed to happen.

Likewise, promises also differ from predictions.
If I tell my children, “I’ll always be there for you.”
I am not making a prediction. Because, one day I will die, and my statement will no longer be true; but when taken as a promise, the statement is true.

Or I might make a conditional promise:
“Do your homework every evening, and we’ll take you to Wonderland.”

I’m not predicting what will happen; rather, I’m promising that I will do something in my power if my children do something within their power.
In so doing, their sense of empowerment grows.

Warnings & promises serve to heighten my sense of responsibility & accountability... waking me up, like children throwing rocks, to realize that current carelessness may result in serious consequences.

If we learn to trust God's warnings and consequences
we will stop doing harmful things or being complacent,
and do what is good and fruitful, even when it's difficult.

So what about 'visions' in the Book of Revelation
or those end-time words from the mouth of Jesus,
such as Chapter 13 in Mark's Gospel and parallels.
Thousands of books have been written... offering
to decode these so-called 'blueprints' of the future.

McClaren offers this analogy as an alternative approach:

*"If you've been to an old-fashioned Zoo, you've seen
lions or elephants pacing cement floors behind bars.
Watch a while, and you learn something about them.
But, what you'd learn would be miniscule compared
to what you'd learn by going to Africa and watching
them in their 'natural' environment over a few years.
There you would observe their social lives, their sex-
uality, their hunting habits & their migration patterns.*

*"Similarly... if you put Revelation on a concrete slab
behind iron bars you'll learn something - but you'll
misunderstand its true nature, unless you set it free
in its natural habitat. What is that natural habitat?*

*"The Book of Revelation is an example of a genre of
ancient Judaism - known as Jewish Apocalyptic. To
read it unaware of that background is like watching
Star Trek, or any science fiction show, and seeing it
as an historical documentary, or thinking you know
all about lions because you saw one pacing in a zoo.*

*"Jewish Apocalyptic is part of a larger eco-system we
know as Literature of the Oppressed. Reading, and*

*acknowledging it as such, it comes alive... we see it
in a fresh way. Instead of talk about a distant future,
it becomes discussion of challenges in the immediate
present. It becomes a book of warnings and promises.*

The original Listeners to Readings of Revelation
lived in a constant threat of religious oppression
from religious authorities and the Roman Empire.

In that environment, you can't speak,
and - even more certainly - can't write
what might be perceived as criticism
of Government and other Authorities.

Caught red-handed with such subversive literature
I'd be arrested & imprisoned, maybe even executed;
but don't speak about my oppressors, they succeed
in controlling me... intimidating me... silencing me.

Do I have options? Is there anything I CAN do?

Yes! That's the genius of Jewish Apocalyptic & literature
of the oppressed. Tell the truth about those in power: they
are corrupt, bloodthirsty and doomed... but do it covertly.

Instead of the Roman Empire you talk about the Beast.
Religious authorities are personified as false Prophets.
Instead of the Emperor, you tell a story about a Dragon.

In this way, you refuse to be silenced in fear
and you don't create incriminating evidence
that could otherwise lead to torture or death
for the Authors and Readers of the literature.

In this light Revelation becomes a powerful book about God's here & now kingdom, available to all.

Rather than a prognostication about the future having meaning only for the people of that day, therefore unintelligible for its original audience, it is full of ever-relevant warnings and promises.

Hence... it presented each succeeding generation with the inspiration, wisdom and encouragement they much needed.

In its original context, and in simple English, Revelation seems to say something like this:

"Yes, the religious authorities and the Roman Empire are persecuting us. The Emperor - the king of kings - thinks he is the ultimate authority. But we are part of the empire of God, the kingdom of God (in Matthew's Gospel, the kingdom of heaven). Our "King of Kings" will ultimately triumph and God's kingdom is forever.

"The Roman emperor and the Religious Systems which collude with him will succumb to the forces of history; and the Roman Empire will run its course, eventually disintegrating. So let's remain faithful, even to death.

"Let's not be intimidated, but rather, full of confidence and hope, let us focus on the glorious reality of God's kingdom and see the current 'Powers That Be' for the passing phenomena they truly are.... Instead of letting our imagination be captivated by fearful scenes of torture and death, let's fill our imagination with another vision of reality that will allow us to endure with joy."

To say this openly would have been treasonous, but to say and read them in code would be courageous & liberating, not just living, but joyful living.

PAUSE

Jewish Apocalyptic was a popular genre in Jesus' day. Influenced by it, he would also have used its language.

Against the backdrop of Jewish Apocalyptic, we discover phrases that sound like they are about the destruction of the world... such as:

"The moon will turn to blood"

or

"The stars will fall from the sky"

are stock phrases in Jewish Apocalyptic.

They're no more to be taken literally than similar phrases we might read in our newspapers today,

"The election results were earth shattering"

or

"Trudeau's announcements sent shock waves throughout Ottawa."

or

"September 11, 2001, everything changed."

Do political events cause tectonic plates to shift, or terrorists' activities alter the rules of physics?

Nor do I presume Jesus' saying that, literally, the moon will turn to red & white blood cells & plasma, or that stars - defying gravity - will fall to the earth.

Seething beneath the surface in the Jewish community is the question: how to respond to Roman occupation?

The 1st option one with more of the same: collaboration, and compromise preferred by those enjoying its pay-offs.

The 2nd has various counter-futures imagined by existing groups for whom the status quo is not quite so profitable:

- Zealots' fight response (fight, rebel, terrorize)
- Essenes' flight response (isolate, evacuate, escape)
- Pharisees' blame response (condemn, shame, avoid)

but Jesus enters with a more creative future... saying,

“Don't believe any of these people nor follow them: neither in capitulation nor in fight, flight or blame. It is time to live in a radically new way - the way of the kingdom of God... learn from me how to take this path, for it is the only way to avoid destruction.”

Jesus himself, as announced by John the B, offers an alternative: *“Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

Thinking outside the *“pie-in-the-sky in the by-&-by box”* we encounter something more powerful and important.

Given a balance of promises & warnings, we're offered a sobering choice: one that's at our fingertips, at hand.

If Jesus was right, and the kingdom of God has come, and is coming in the ways I've described this morning, if we do, indeed, have the choice today, and every day: to seek it, enter it, receive it, live within it or invest in it, even sacrifice & suffer for it; then our future hangs in the balance no less than it did for Jesus' original audience.

We invest in today's conventional or counter futures, or we can seek the creative future offered by Jesus.

Trust Jesus, follow his way, believe in the impossible, in personal & family and at all levels of political affairs, then I make decisions & choose directions of one sort.

If I believe it unrealistic, too difficult or just plain stupid, I will make other decisions and choose other directions.

And depending on how we respond to Jesus call we will create two very different worlds, two very different futures: one hellish, the other heavenly.

One familiar world has a future too much like our past: full of regret and pain, what the biblical prophetic term: *“weeping and gnashing of teeth”* was intended to evoke.

The other world, the new world, is not free of tears, but there, comfort comes from God, tears are dried conflict leads to reconciliation rather than revenge. generosity flows wherever need arises... In short, this new world is the one promised by the prophets.

Jesus proclamation, echoing that of John the Baptist, tells us that this new world is so possible it's at hand, within reach.... Now is the time to rethink everything, start learning to live the ways of the kingdom of God.

Its warnings & promises encourages intentionality; its ability to empower us encourages responsibility; its immediacy encourages us to enter it... to build it and to keep praying for it to come everywhere, Amen.