

November 14, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

God's Future...Now

Isaiah 65:17-25

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

Luke 21:5-19

...for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

We are in the closing days of the Christian liturgical year. In two weeks, Advent will bring us to a new year of our journey with Christ through what Thomas Merton called "the seasons of the spirit". During these weeks, the scripture readings expand and deepen our vision and awareness. We hear about "new heavens and a new earth," about "the days that are coming," and the call to be alert, for "the time is near." These are ULTIMATE things, the biggest picture possible. What is the ultimate goal of life? How do we live our lives in light of the ultimate meaning and movement of life? Room is made for such questions during these closing days of the seasons of the spirit.

It is so important that we learn more and more to live fully in each present moment. That is where we touch our life with God, in God's world and among God's people. And yet, as Jesus says a few verses beyond our reading from Luke, at times we need stand up and lift our heads to see that our redemption is near. We need to glimpse the big picture of God working in the midst of everything, bringing about life that is just, compassionate, harmonious, and enjoyed by every human being.

Isaiah 65 touches our deepest hopes and longings. God is renewing all of reality--new heavens and a new earth. Peace and justice are the natural order of the creation. The will of life is toward people enjoying the fruits of their own labors, without being exploited, and living in health and well being from birth to death. Children are born into a world that nurtures instead of threatening and warping them. This is not about life after death, or some far off heaven. It is the unfolding of the life of the world the way God made it to be. It is about God's will being done on earth as in heaven. It is God's dream for us and the world--heaven on earth.

We need this ultimate sense of things, that life has essential meaning and is unfolding according to that meaning, even when we cannot see it for the pain or turmoil around us or in us at any given moment. This vision of life speaks against every effort to force life into our narrow and self-serving molds. When the church, for instance, joins together Christianity and nationalism and militarism, it has abandoned the biblical vision for life. Isaiah's vision sheds its clear and revealing light over every narrow religious, political, or cultural view and program. It breaks down the boundaries of self, nation, even religion. It calls us to live according to our own true created nature, to live now the way of what will be. We are to be persons and a community embodying this vision of life in the ways we treat each other, all people, and the creation. This is what it means when we pray the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." It has the sense of "Let your will be done, let your kingdom come, and let it be so in me right this moment, in my own heart and mind, in my relationships and each thing I do and say."

And, let it be so with us as a community of Jesus! Disciples of Christ scholar Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker have published a book entitled, *SAVING PARADISE: HOW CHRISTIANITY TRADED LOVE OF THIS WORLD FOR CRUCIFIXION AND EMPIRE*. They document their discoveries of how church communities for the first 1,000 years mostly understood themselves as a heaven on earth, an earthly paradise. The dominant images of Jesus were as shepherd, teacher, healer. "[In] the early church, paradise--first and foremost--was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God."(p. XV) The first documented crucifix dates only to the late 10th century, in Germany. It was only from that time that the crucifixion and atonement theology (God willed Jesus' death as a price for our sins) became dominant, accompanied by fear, guilt, an obsession with life after death, and increasing control and power vested in the church structure and hierarchy. So, during the first millennium of its life, the church knew the world as the beloved creation of God, in which God was working with redemptive love. The risen Jesus dwelt in the community of faith to help it be a paradise on earth, a community that embodied and was part of God's realm, the new heavens and earth. This view is very close to the vision of Isaiah. We, Jesus' community, can be now what God is up to for the whole

world.

The gospel reading is also about ultimate things. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem for the last time in Jesus' life. Coming out of the temple, someone says, Wow, Jesus, just look at this wonderful building! Isn't our temple the greatest thing in the world? Isn't our religion the greatest in the world? Jesus quickly douses their enthusiasm. Not one stone will be left upon another. This is all going to end as God brings about the fulfillment of life. [The Greek word often translated "end" is *telos*, which means "end" in terms of completion or fulfillment.]

Just last week we heard Haggai telling the people that God wanted them to rebuild the temple that was destroyed at the time of their exile. They needed the temple project to re-center their shattered lives in God's presence with them. With Jesus, it is a different time and circumstance. His message all along has been the kingdom of God. His call to discipleship has been an invitation for people to follow him in living the life of that coming kingdom NOW. The role of religion and religious practice is the life of God's kingdom, living our lives the way God made us to live them. Religion is not an end in itself. When John Lennon wrote his song "Imagine," he got it right: "Imagine there's ...no religion, too." It is the fading away of religion as the life to which religion points us fully unfolds in us. The kingdom of God is not Christianity. The realm of God is not the church and its structures, rites, doctrines, and practices. The kingdom of God is what God is doing to bring the world and us to full manifestation as God's creation and God's creatures. It is not about the temple, but what the temple points us to.

Now they get excited. So, when is this going to happen? What signs can we look for? When are those other people going to get theirs? When is our way is going to win out? Jesus continues to adjust their attitudes. Speculating on the hows and whens of God's coming kingdom is none of our business. Nation will rise against nation. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There is always struggle and tension between the old order and the new, the old world and the new one. BUT, says Jesus, that's not it. Don't get fooled by signs. A whole religious industry has been built around claiming to know and predict ultimate things. The Tim LaHayes and Hal Lindsey's have gotten rich and famous off of their thrillers about the world coming to an end. T.V. evangelists draw timelines and name the major players in the end of the world drama, the "good guys" always being Christians and the United States, of course. You can't know these things, says Jesus. And, that is a distraction from what IS your business—living now as those who belong to the realm of God, life as God made it to be lived.

That is the essential meaning of Jesus' words about his disciples being persecuted, dragged into court, and abandoned by their families because of their faithfulness. Most of us will never face the exact kinds of conflict Jesus talked about. But if we are trying to faithfully live our lives according to Isaiah's vision of the new heavens and earth, of life that is available to all in fairness, justice, peace, and well-being, then we will experience how resistant and threatened people and systems and structures are, including those of the church. And sometimes the way things are in our society and world will make us think that maybe this new heaven and earth thing is just a wish-dream, a bit of wistful idealism. That is why it is so important for us to stay in touch with this wider and deeper vision of reality through our daily inward journey work. It is not idealism, but the very nature and shape of life as God created it to be. You remember Frost's poem "Mending Wall"? It has that famous line in it: "something there is that does not love a wall, that wants it down." Meditating on a New England rock wall, Frost saw the power within life that constantly, imperceptibly works to wear down walls and separations and human efforts to divide and possess. I think that is what Isaiah and Jesus were talking about. It gives us a hope in which we can root our hearts, and out of which we can live our lives in the service of life.

Three years ago, Kaye and I had the great gift of traveling in India, seeing the work being done by Indian Christians through the Church of South India and of North India. These were missions supported by us through Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ Global Ministries. Many times I was deeply moved by what I saw, places where the vision of Isaiah and Jesus was thriving. One example.

We stayed for three days at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, an ancient city in southern India. There we saw the creative work the seminary does within a Hindu culture. They are not interested in making Christians out of Hindus, but living out the Isaiah/Jesus vision of life.

One day we went to the countryside and some villages to see agricultural work made possible by a ministry that grew out of the seminary but now stands on its own. We were accompanied by a former seminary professor who now heads up the agricultural project, and a seminary student. We visited a village where the women were participating in a project that gave them each one cow on loan, from which they could derive milk

for their own use and for sale to purchase the cow. They were extremely proud of this project. Somehow the rumor had spread that our group was related to the lending bank, and that we were coming to reclaim the cows. But you know what? They still welcomed us with garlands and shawls and food, but of course were relieved when the matter was cleared up and they knew that we were friends and supporters.

We then walked through fields and beside groves of coconut palms to see a soil enrichment project. Here I need to share an unfortunate incident that shows how our attachments to culture and religion get in the way of God's realm. As we arrived at the enrichment project, the seminary student held small bowls of color to place on our foreheads a *tilak*, a dot or smudge of color that has a variety of cultural and religious meanings for Indians. Here it was a sign of welcome, and on our part, receiving it was a sign of gratitude and respect. The person from our group in front of me shook his head in refusal when offered the *tilak*. I felt deep embarrassment and shame, and quickly stepped up to offer my forehead. As the student placed the *tilak* on me, he spoke a soft "Thank you". When we make our little habitual and prideful stands for nation or culture or religion, we are obstacles to what God is doing in the world. We reveal our smallness of mind and spirit and vision.

We were proudly shown the trays of rich, black soil, filled with earthworms doing their work. We were offered delicious rice pudding and made to feel very special and welcomed by the children and adults. We could not understand their language, nor they ours, but faces communicate quite well. As the sun was beginning to set, we walked to a new water pump that supplied water for irrigation and the villages. A couple of the village men cranked it up and beamed as the water shot out into the cistern.

Darkness was falling as we walked through a wooded area and into the warmly lit square of another village. We were given seats in front of the modest temple with festive lights over our heads. There was dancing, and speeches were given, welcoming us as friends from the U.S church who supported the work being done for and by these simple, poor people. We were served coconut milk, in the shells with plastic straws, and bites of coconut meat. It was the grandest feast I have ever received.

A Christian minority living out its faith, not imposing its beliefs, not clinging to its forms or trying to perpetuate itself, not caught in religion, but being of service to and in solidarity with the poorest of God's people so that they would be empowered in their own lives. Remember Isaiah's vision--enjoying the fruits of their own labor, inhabiting their own houses? These people and villages were all Hindu, but it did not matter. And it did not matter that we were Christians. All that mattered was that here was the vision of Isaiah as real as it could be, right in front of our eyes. I saw the deepest nature of life itself, the way the world was made to be. God's future was there and then. It is here and now. When we live in the here and now with the Isaiah/Jesus vision in our hearts and shaping our lives, we know what will certainly be, in God's will and God's time.