

Before a clip of an interview he conducted with Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Bill Moyers began by saying roughly this: when most of us think of the evils of apartheid, we think of the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela on Robben Island for 27 years for his opposition to apartheid. But what we don't realize is that when Mandela was in prison, he was more or less safe from assassination. We don't realize that there was another principle actor who was not safe because he was free, and subsequently, unprotected. He was referring to Archbishop Tutu. In his interview with the archbishop, he asked him how he and his wife and their four children faced the possibility that an assassin's bullet might end their lives in retribution for their stance against apartheid. Archbishop Tutu replied that the only way to stand against that terror or for that matter, any terror, is to say to it, "Our God is a God of resurrection – YOU CAN'T DO US IN!" It may seem a forceful declaration to hear this amidst the softly piped in music of departments stores and commercial Christmas, but this is the word of the Lord for us this day.

Jesus' tone of voice abruptly changes in this 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke. What he says goes something like this: the temple is going to be destroyed, and it's going to get bad, and there are going to be wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines and plagues – dreadful signs to show the shattering of the cosmos, and if you carry my name, you are going to face persecution and death and suffering. But – I will be with you in the midst of this. I will give you the words to say. When Jesus begins throwing around these apocalyptic warnings, his tone of voice changes.

Apocalyptic literature is a category of writing that is in the Bible – we most commonly associate it with the phantasmagoric landscape of Revelation, but it appears elsewhere as well. Now, if you are thinking of *Apocalypse Now* or the Left Behind series of books, forget all that. There are plentiful imaginative interpretations of these parts of the bible and what they mostly share in common is this: they are a distortion of what God intends to say. Apocalyptic portions of Scripture represent a change of perspective, a change of tone of voice, intended to make a point. Think of when Flannery O'Connor, at the end of her short stories dramatically lengthens her sentences and descriptions in order to make us slow down and realize that something significant is about to happen. She gains altitude so that we can see the big picture.

Apocalyptic writes the themes of good and evil playing out in a cosmic battle in huge letters, so that we can see them. And right here in Luke 21, right at the end of Jesus' ministry, right before we encounter the stories of Jesus' Passion, Crucifixion, death and resurrection, Luke inserts this little apocalyptic sermon from Jesus about what is going to happen when the end comes. Luke wants us to get altitude and see what Jesus is saying. He wants us to see there is a great cosmic struggle between good and evil and to know the followers of Jesus are on the side of good, and that there are grim, demonic forces that would destroy us because of it.

These apocalyptic stories aren't intended to be taken literally. They are intended to be understood metaphorically. They are intended to be witnesses to God's goodness, God's power and God's endurance. The point they make is that when the dust settles, Jesus Christ is Lord of all creation.

Luke included this story in this place because his readers were already experiencing the very persecutions and sufferings that Jesus foretold in this discourse. Luke's readers needed an immediate and deliberate reminder that in the battle of good and evil that they were encountering under Roman rule, at the end of the day, our God reigns. Christ, and only Christ, is ultimately Lord. Luke himself is a preacher, and he is preaching a message of hope his congregation.

Fred Craddock says this:

"Disciples are not exempt from suffering. There is nothing here of the arrogance one sometimes sees and hears in modern apocalypticists, an arrogance born of a rapture in which believers are lifted above the conditions of persecution and hardship. There are no scenes here of planes falling from the sky because believing pilots have been raptured or cars crashing on the highway because their drivers were believers and hence have been lifted to an indifferent bliss. According to our text, we are in a time of witnessing in the face of suffering and death, but 'by your endurance you will gain your lives.'"

Craddock is saying that those portrayals of an apocalyptic world are distortions of the Biblical witness. But here is what he said that truly caught my eye:

"In anyone doubts that this period of testimony is still present, that doubt will be removed by attendance at an All Saints' service in which can be heard a roll call of the imprisoned and murdered faithful who are our contemporaries."<sup>1</sup>

We are still called to pray for and work for the Kingdom of God. Christ is Lord, and though we do not face real persecution for our faith, there are those who do. And we are called to bear witness that Christ will be with them, and we are called to pray for those who do, and to work ease suffering. We are Christ's church, and in that calling is

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred. Luke in Interpretation. P245.

implicit an understanding that we are part of the communion of the Saints, and so we bear with the saints who bear persecution on Christ's behalf.

I recently came across a scrap of commentary on the Lord's Prayer that was written by someone I've never heard of, a saint named Julio de Santa Ana. He writes: "thy kingdom come...where people resist injustice, live in solidarity and seek a more human social order. Help us to recognize the ferment of your kingdom already at work. Bless those who are poor, those who suffer for the sake of Justice, those who promote and defend human rights. Bless the children of our countries and protect them from terror and oppression."

Did you know we are praying for all that and more? It is enough to make one afraid to pray the Lord's prayer. But if Christ is Lord, we can settle for nothing less.

Christians know perfectly well that Jesus doesn't guarantee we won't experience suffering, but rather that Christ will give us the words to say in the face of it. But the story doesn't end there, though. Luke placed this portion of apocalyptic right before the story of the passion and the crucifixion and the resurrection to say that there is more to this story than the persecution and the affliction. There is hope, because in spite of this all, our God will work God's purposes out. And God's purposes are resurrection.

We are working for the kingdom in light of the resurrection.

When we gather in safe and comfortable houses of worship to pray and to sing, we do so for all the world. We do so on behalf of all whose voices are silenced and stifled and we say together, Christ is Lord!

Isaiah also gives us a vision of the kingdom – an odd vision, of lions and lambs together. It's not so much odd as it is absurd. You know what wolves do to lambs. Even still,

Isaiah perseveres with this vision because he knows something we know too: that God has a different plan for creation – a redemptive plan for creation where wolves can change and the way it is is not the way it ever shall be.

We don't really live in fear of bombs, do we? Our sanctuaries are generally speaking worth of the name, they are safe spaces. But we have other fears to face. And to them all the proclamation remains, “Christ is Lord!”

Christ is Lord, not cancer cells. Christ is Lord, not racism. Christ is Lord, not economic forces; Christ is Lord, not war and death. Christ is Lord and so we have the courage to face these things in the sure and certain knowledge that Jesus himself will be with us. But I don't want to propose to anyone who is suffering here today that they embrace a pie in the sky, by and by, theology that says to us all, don't worry that you're suffering now, you'll be fine in the kingdom, pie in the sky. Don't worry that you're bereaved now, you'll be better later. Pie in the sky. Don't worry if you are hungry now, because Jesus says you are blest if you hunger and thirst. That's pie in the sky and it does nothing for now. When Jesus makes a promise to his disciples that he will give them the words to say in their own defense, he means now. And when Jesus says he is going to be with his suffering disciples, he means us to be his body.

British Theologian Lesslie Newbigin puts it this way:

“To be elect in Christ Jesus...means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God's saving purpose for his whole world, to be a sign and an agent and the firstfruit of his blessed kingdom, which is for all. It means therefore, as the New Testament makes abundantly clear, to take our share with his suffering, to bear the scars of the passion...It means that through this particular body of people who bear the name

of Jesus through history, this strange and often absurd company of people so feeble, so foolish so often fatally compromised with the world, this body with all its contingency and particularity, is the body which has the responsibility of bearing the secret of God's reign through world history.”<sup>2</sup>

It's a bit absurd, isn't it? It's just about as absurd as Isaiah's vision of wolves and lambs snuggling up together. It's just ever so slightly absurd that God would choose us to share God's grace with each other and the world. And some days I feel up to it, and some days I don't. But it's true. It's true that Christ is Lord and that he wants us to be Christ to each other, and when we do it, it's true that Christ is with us. And it's true when we gather around Christ's Table, he is with us. It's not pie in the sky by and by, it's Immanuel, God with us. Christ is Lord, and that means something to us today. It is the word that Christians have had to share down through the ages.

And so, finally, I'd like to close with the words of John Donne, preached on our Isaiah text at Whitehall in 1626,

“Go in Peace, and be this your Peace, to know this \*\*\* God hath laid the whole curse belonging to us upon him, that hangs upon the crosse; But \*\*\* to all them that hang upon him that hangeth there, God offereth now, all those blessings which he that hangeth there hath purchased with the inestimable price of his Incorruplicable blood; and to this glorious Sonne of God, who hath suffered all this, and to the most Almighty *Father*, who hath *done* all this, and to the *blessed Spirit of God*, who offereth now to *apply all this*, be ascribed by us and by the whole Church all power, praise, might, majesty, glory and dominion, now and forevermore *Amen.*<sup>3</sup> And Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society. P87

<sup>3</sup> Donne, John. The Sermons of John Donne. Theodore Gill, Ed. P225-226