The End of the Gospel

June 7th, 2020

Trinity Sunday

The end of the Gospel of Matthew is a new beginning. In only a few words, Jesus of Nazareth gave his apostles the simplest and most difficult commission. As we read in the Gospel of Matthew: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:16-20). There is a strong sense of the absolute in these words. The word *all* is mentioned four times. In Greek it is: πᾶσα, πάντα, πάντα, πάσας (Strong’s 3956). Our ability to live the kingdom of heaven throughout history has often depended on how we have interpreted these four *alls.* When all the authority of Jesus is eclipsed by magisterial, questionable, human authority; when making disciples of all nations has been eclipsed by exercising dominion over other nations in culture, economics, or statecraft; when teaching people to obey all of the gospel, or everything Jesus teaches, has been eclipsed by every human, worldly and suspect teaching; when the living presence of Jesus at all times is eclipsed by doubt because history must pass through seasons of tragedy—we are not following Jesus or his commission, and the gospel really has ended.

The apostles were asked to share a message and a narrative of infinite wisdom. It was not a message on how to acquire human power, human justice, human wealth, or human happiness, or human safety. It was the message that God became human, so that humans might become like God. The early Christian Irenaeus says: “[Christ] was in these last days, according to the time appointed by the Father, united to His own workmanship, inasmuch as He became a man liable to suffering ... He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam—namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God—that we might recover in Christ Jesus.” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.18.1 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds), *The Writings of Irenaeus* Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1848), p. 337-338); he also quotes Justin Martyr, another early Christian, who said: “"I would not have believed the Lord Himself, if He had announced any other than He who is our framer, maker, and nourisher. But because the only-begotten Son came to us from the one God, who both made this world and formed us, and contains and administers all things, summing up His own handiwork in Himself, my faith towards Him is steadfast, and my love to the Father immoveable, God bestowing both upon us." (Ibid). Those are beautiful words, but easily lost or misapplied. Perhaps we are just as confused as the crowd when Jesus said: “‘An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matthew 12:39-41). It raises two questions: Why is sharing the message so important? What exactly is the message?

To share the gospel message is to engage in something that is intensely human and intensely divine. It is very human to transmit the wisdom of the past. For some years, Michael Griffin has been giving lectures on finding well-being and happiness in ancient classical wisdom. In discussing the Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius, he says that: “He was an example of a philosopher-king in antiquity…While spending much of his life on the frontlines of war, away from home and family, Aurelius kept a journal in which he tried to apply philosophical principles to find meaning and some form of happiness through very difficult times. Showing how these ideas can be applied to modern life, Griffin notes that Nelson Mandela cited Aurelius’s meditations among the things that helped him through his decades of imprisonment and later to forgive his captors.” (Pat Johnson, “Wisdom of the ancients can help people live better lives”, *The Vancouver Courier,* Nov 12, 2015. Regarding Michael Griffin). In this very basic and secular sense, then, the apostles were carrying with them the treasures of the Hebrew Bible and the parchments that would become the Greek New Testament, a corpus of wisdom which they saw fully embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. Consider the words of Isaiah: “Seek and read from the book of the LORD” (Isaiah 34:16). Today, at the very least, we have an imperative to share from this ancient book, anything from this ancient wellspring that might lead to flourishing and well-being. In a spiritual sense, however, the apostles, and their descendants in Christ, share something greater—the words of life (John 6:63, 68). It is our faith in Jesus that gives us eternal life. Without the words of life, there is no life. The apostle Paul said: “The righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Romans 10:6-15). As modern messengers, we should remember the sacred things entrusted to us. None of us is empty-handed; none of us have nothing to say, or else we have followed Christ in vain and do not really know what the love of God is.

The message is also key, and the message is Jesus. It will always be Jesus—who he is, what he taught and did, where he wants you to serve and where the kingdom really is, when he is at work, and why he came to us that we might come to God. Sometimes, however, the passage of history, with all of its tragedies, conflicts, and confusion, with its bitter truths and sweet lies, its sweet truths and bitter lies, can obscure the message or make our ears insensitive to hearing the beauty and truth of the gospel. In our age, we have a great crisis of meaning and relationship. One aspect of this is the crisis in humanities education; we forget that we need religion and the humanities to teach us ethics—to know right from wrong and how to live. In the last century, the paleontologist Loren Eiseley made this argument in his book *The Firmament of Time.* In an article just a few days ago, Frank Bruni reminds us of the power of literature to make us think and feel—and he selects as an example a case in literature that could summarize the gospel, saying: “’Moby-Dick.’ Now there’s a transformative text about our investments in — and responsibilities to — one another. Consider the celebrated passage in which Ishmael describes being roped to Queequeg, who dangles over their ship’s side to attend to a whale carcass. If one man gets sucked into the heaving water, both men go under. And Ishmael reflects ‘that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two; that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another’s mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death.’ ‘This situation of mine,’ he adds, ‘was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes.’” (Frank Bruni, “The End of College as We Knew It? Restaurants get eulogies. Airlines get bailouts. Shakespeare gets kicked when he’s down” *The New York Times,* June 4th, 2020). For those of you who have not read *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, Queequeg is the Christ-like pagan from Polynesia who dies during the shipwreck, but whose coffin saves his best friend and the sole survivor Ishmael, the narrator of the story. Likewise, the death of Jesus saves us from the waves of time and reveals His love for us. This is what Irenaeus and Justin Martyr mean when they speak of God becoming human—it was to tether us to Him and lift us from the storming sea of nihilistic life and spiritual death. In *Moby-Dick* it is precisely the interdependence of Queequeg and Ishmael that overcomes evil and the fear of death; it is this kind of communion and love that enables us to live the kingdom in a meaningful way. It takes courage and humility and endurance to be a Queequeg or an Ishmael. It takes courage and humility and endurance to live the gospel, to love enough to be Christ for others and invite them to follow Christ. To die to oneself in the sea and rise again. To walk to distant cities that hate you, cities that you might hate, and proclaim the mercy of God. That is the sign of Jonah. From this flows real power, justice, wealth, happiness and safety. As Søren Kierkegaard once wrote, “For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.” I only know one ancient story in all of history that perfectly illustrates love. It is about a man who died on a cross for his friends, teaching them: “‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another” (John 15:12-17). One of the alluring and beautiful traits of the early Christian writers is that they spoke for Christ; they only knew the kingdom of heaven. They rarely spoke about their own countries and yet they all spoke as equals. They argued about theology—sometimes very fractiously, sadly—but it is in the early church that you find John Cassian, possibly a Scythian or Slav, Augustine a North African, Ephrem a Syrian, Ambrose an Italian, and numerous others—all equals, all speaking with dignity, humility, confidence, and interdependence. All together in a joint-stock company of spiritual riches. They were one in Christ, and their oneness in Christ was what they lived for. In our language, *end* does not only mean a *terminus*; it can also mean a goal, a *telos.* In this sense the end of the Gospel of Matthew presents a very beautiful end, a blessing—to be with one another in Christ and with Christ; as Jesus says: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).