

The Way

"I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him."

Such is the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who, in his vision of what is truly real, in his invitation to his friends and neighbors to glimpse what is truly real, is met with stones flying and ears intentionally plugged up — it is our embrace of the world as we want it to be rather than accepting the free gift of the world as God knows it to be...

Don't blame the folks who are stoning Stephen this morning.

Isn't this how most folks react to this weird faith that Jesus calls us to?

Covering ears so as not to hear,, what?

Things disturbing things like this:

"But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you!

(Like the Taliban and Iran and Trump or Obama!)

Lend without expectation of return.

(Even to that bum on the corner, even to your no good brother-in-law!)

Be merciful, as God is merciful!

(Even to that crazy ex-girlfriend, boyfriend, husband or wife!)

Give to anyone who asks!

(Even if you gave something to her yesterday!)

Do to others as you would have them do to you!"

(As one friend candidly acknowledged, it's so easy to ask for forgiveness, so hard to give it...)

We live in times when a great many are worried about declining church membership, about the seeming lost voice of the church in community life, and about changes happening throughout our many cultures.

One fellow talks about a great retreat among orthodox Christians, back to the monasteries of the Middle Ages, to somehow preserve the faith from the onslaught of modern culture, from the changing attitudes about power and gender and race and class.

But it seems to me that what these fears are actually about is not Christianity but Christendom.

Huh????

It's this:

Christianity is all about selfless service, self sacrificing love, a refusal to judge one another, a life lived in the amazing freedom of the Holy Spirit to move and act as she wishes, sometimes upending our cherished traditions, usually forcing us out of our comfortable places and into the dynamic and challenging places of love and reconciliation.

We follow a savior who is, in Merton's words, "A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet... who finds his way down a new road.

A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile who lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep..."T. Merton, Hagia Sophia.

In the heart of this vulnerable God, true Christianity is born.

But Christendom is something else entirely.

It is the joining of the church and the state, if not formally, then by each blessing the other.

Christendom happens when the wildly radical demands of the gospel are brought to heel, when faith becomes mere religion, when the uncompromising love for all is reduced to love of the immediate family; when God and country becomes the rallying cry; where enemies are everywhere and they are hated, not loved.

Christendom is focused on rules and order and hierarchy and power and money and the status quo.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, Christendom happens “when religious leaders conflate God’s will with an existing social order, even one blatantly unjust, virulently racist, and impulsively violent.” MLK, Letter From Birmingham Jail.

We have lived most of our lives, indeed, for many centuries, under the boot of Christendom, and it is Christendom that is dying today, thanks be to God!

And for the first time in a very long while, we are at long last free to ask yet again, what does it mean to be a Christian?

Peter tells us in no uncertain terms:

You are a chosen race!

a royal priesthood!

a holy nation!

God’s own people!

in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light!

Once you were not a people,

but now you are God’s people;

once you had not received mercy,

but now you have received mercy.

Meaning what?

Meaning that we are resident aliens in this life, the advance guard of the Kingdom of God.

Meaning that the “real Christian seeks the transformation of all the earth that is not of God’s will.

The real Christian no longer belongs — heart, soul, mind and strength — to an identity defined by tribe, nation, class, gender or ideology.

The real Christian no longer builds a fortress around family, clan, culture or language.

We have a new name — our old identity is now stripped away.

Real Christians offer no pinch of incense to emperors, they sing no national anthems, they bow only to the cross and sing only the hymns of the citizens of the kingdom of God." Commins, *If Only We Could See*, 46-7. paraphrased.

The difference between Christianity and Christendom is revealed in a conversation between St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Innocent III as the Pope is showing the Saint around the grand palaces, full of gold and jewels and fine linens, in what is now called the Vatican.

The pope says to Francis:

"It is the same Church, but we can no longer say with the apostle Peter: 'Gold and silver I have not,' to which Francis answers, 'Nor do you have the power to say, 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk!'"

The power of God exchanged for the power of gold, that's what Christendom does to Christianity...

Which brings us to our gospel this morning.

Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas says to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going.

How can we know the way?"

Jesus says to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.

If you know me, you will know my Father also.

From now on you do know him and have seen him.

The Father and I are one.”

Christendom takes these words of Jesus and uses them as a club to threaten all those who are not card carrying members of the club.

But Christianity knows that Jesus isn't asking for a salute, he's inviting us into a way of living that's rooted in compassion and mercy and humble service, rooted in a desire for peace, a life committed to righting the many wrongs we commit against one another, individually yes, but even more so, collectively, through unjust structures that create vast economic chasms between rich and poor.

This is the way, the truth, and the life — and everyone who embarks on this journey, no matter by what name she calls herself, is on the path to the kingdom.

On this path, we begin to sense the “slippery, the fluidity, between heaven and earth.” Cummins, id. at 48.

We begin to marvel at “an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us — and we do not understand.” Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

And so my friends, “like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk...

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood!

+amen