

23) OUR HOPE BEYOND, Part 1

In this final section of Theology 101, we look at what traditionally has been called "Last Things" or "Eschatology" (from *eschaton*: the end of things). Under this section we reflect on Jesus' reference to the kingdom of God and a vision of a new world, the origin of a second coming of Christ, death, resurrection, immortality, eternal life, heaven, hell, a last judgement and more. Is there something beyond this life and what is as it is in our world now? What difference does it make to believe in a vision of a world and a life beyond? Does that shape how we live here and now?

In this, part 1, we begin with Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel account)

1) "The Kingdom of God is like..." Jesus begins many of his parables this way. So what is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is a concept and a reality that stands against the kingdoms of this world. Whereas power, control and domination based on fear is what the world's kingdoms build on, the kingdom of God is about building community and relationships purely on love. Where love is the motive, the intention and the experience in relationships, the kingdom of God activated by the Holy Spirit is alive.

But is the kingdom of God a here and now reality and experience or something in the future? According to Jesus the kingdom of God is now, and the kingdom of God is a coming reality in some future time too. Every time Christ-love is enacted, shared and received, the kingdom of God is infiltrating the kingdoms of this world. But Jesus also speaks of a future time when the kingdom of God will overrule the kingdoms of this world, not by force or violence, but by transformation. How is that possible? We dream and we hope, and the whole idea of Christ's return to establish God's rule (a second coming) is all about that. The kingdom of God is both a present reality and a vision of a better world we believe in and live into in our living, engaging and relating here and now. As followers of Jesus we live in and through the kingdom of God but also within the kingdoms of the world. We bear witness that we belong to a different kingdom even as we must live, work and engage within this world's kingdom(s).

2) The kingdom of God as both now and future rather than just now or the future is something that Christianity and churches have struggled with throughout history. In the bible, the future coming of a messiah-ruler, representing the God of the Hebrews and of all peoples, was something that people longed for, especially in dark times. Like many before him, Jesus was slotted into such hopes and with such hopes there were all kinds of expectations of what a messiah was to be and do. The most popular of such expectations envisioned a political/military messiah who would liberate the people from foreign domination by force and make them strong and dominant among the kingdoms of the world. Jesus' vision, however, was very different. If the goal is to win people's hearts rather than force them into submission, a

different kind of power had to be flowing through the messiah - the power of love. As Jesus' vision came into conflict with the vision of the ruling authorities of the people, and as Jesus spoke out publicly, denouncing such authorities and the fear and violence they espoused to keep people subjected to their vision, the authorities engineered the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of Roman rulers as a false messiah and a threat to the rule of the empire.

But beginning with his followers, Jesus was believed and declared to have risen from the dead. This meant that the power and victory of love was now envisioned as a two-part process. As Jesus' followers were inspired to come together and build communities of the kingdom within the kingdoms of this world, they also now anticipated a second coming of the Messiah-Jesus where a fuller establishment of the kingdom of God would take place. In the meantime they would live within the sphere of Christ's kingdom-love as resurrection people within the larger kingdoms of a world dominated by power built on fear.

3) Throughout Christian history, however, a tension arose between different views of the kingdom related to the second coming of Christ. Are we as Christians, in anticipation of Christ's coming again to establish more fully the kingdom of God, called to prepare the way like John the Baptist? Some Christian movements (called the Social Gospel more recently in Protestantism) believed that by building a better world of justice and care for the vulnerable, as well as better systems of democratic governance, Christians were working alongside the Spirit preparing the way for the kingdom of God to arrive. Other movements, more evangelical and fundamentalist, came to believe that Christ would come more dramatically in the face of a total destruction of the world as it is. Those faithful to Christ would be taken up (the word is "raptured") to heaven and the world as we know it would be destroyed as a judgement.

So what difference does it make to believe we as Christians have a role to play in the more fully coming kingdom of God within history versus more of a rapture and escape from the world kind of kingdom vision? Well, if I believe I am an instrument (the hands, feet, voice and heart) of Christ in my own small way and alongside others, I will invest in this world believing the Holy Spirit is at work in the world against the destructive powers of evil seeking to imprison and destroy life through fear, hate, indifference and violent force. We as Christians have a ministry that is social as much as it is individual and personal, and this is far more faithful to the biblical vision. An Evangelical/fundamentalist vision of the second coming of Christ, however, sees the world as doomed and lost and deserving of the destruction and annihilation that is to come. This also means the destiny of believers is to be rescued from the destruction and taken up to heaven to live in a different place and with those and only those who are confessionally "born-again" Christians.

But what does the bible teach? While the last book of Revelation has been the dominant source of end of the world destruction beliefs, the actual teaching is that God's vision is to fulfill what God started in creating the world. The second coming of Christ is aimed at a

renewal of creation (a renewal of the garden of Eden) which requires a repentance-forgiveness-transformation of humankind who have been an instrument of evil in ruining our world. By working for the kingdom through love, justice, compassion and care, we as followers of Christ are anticipating such fuller creational renewal. By caring for each other, especially the vulnerable, and also our earth, we are acting as embodied instruments of Christ through his Spirit. Judgement (more to say on this in part 2-3) is never an end in itself, but a means of purging the evil that has possessed and afflicted us humans in our world in order to heal us toward readiness to live in a kingdom where love reigns in and through all life. This is the progressive, biblical vision and we at Armour Heights espouse such a vision.

One final note. Those of you who have been exposed to more evangelical/fundamentalist visions may be familiar with terms like: "premillennial" and "postmillennial" views of Christ's second coming, the "rapture", and "dispensationalism" in its various forms. All these views come out of literal readings of parts of the book of Revelation, Daniel, the apocalyptic chapters of the gospels and some obscure references in prophets like Ezekiel. It's amazing what people can come up with by taking pieces, calculating numbers and combining all that with wild imagination. As much as this may seem to be biblical, it has nothing to do with the actual biblical vision because it fails to understand the historical context or the way metaphorical imagery in the bible communicates deeper spiritual truth. If you would like to know more about any of these terms and what they refer to, please ask me. Dr. Harris:

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In the next parts, we will explore the difference between resurrection and immortality, the concept of a last judgement, heaven and the concept of hell.