

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

Between Isaiah's Peaceable Kingdom, and Matthew's John the Baptist, our scriptures today are filled with vivid images. It is difficult not to find ourselves in the THRALL of Isaiah's beautiful vision, or the Baptist's radical call to justice. These stories call for ACTION, NOT just happy feelings. In Isaiah the Spirit moves God's anointed to bring peace to creation. And Matthew's Baptist encourages us to "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." (Matt. 3)

What is common to both passages is the idea that actions change the world best when they begin with a change of heart. The justice and faithfulness of Isaiah's messiah proceed from the Spirit of God – the same Spirit who breathed LIFE into creation. The repentance John preached only bears fruit by the POWER OF THE SPIRIT lighting a new fire in human hearts. Both visions are dramatic, and deeply etched into the Christian imagination. John the Baptist has been depicted in Christian art all over the world. Isaiah's *Peaceable Kingdom* was made famous by the American Quaker artist Edward Hicks (1780-1845).

The *Peaceable Kingdom* was and IS a powerful image. It expresses the deep and PERSISTENT hope that justice and peace would be made concrete. It is also comprehensive: God's peace encompasses BOTH the human AND the cosmic order. Justice will be established between all people, and peace will be established among all creatures. In this vision, the social and the cosmic are thoroughly intertwined; what affects HUMANS effects their environment, and vice-versa. We certainly have alarming, scientific proof of this today! This IS a powerful vision – so powerful that even Jesus caught it. And he passed it on to us. It is what he prayed for when he said: "THY KINGDOM COME." THIS was the kingdom he

was referring to; this *peaceable kingdom*. Situations that are dangerous, toxic or deadly can become safe, healthy and life-giving. The sheer extravagance of the vision continues to have a hold on our imagination. (*NIB VI*, GM Tucker, pp. 138-144)

From Jesus' time until our own, Christians have tried to bear fruit worthy of repentance, and MAKE REAL the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. Occasionally, we have succeeded. Repeatedly we have failed. It is both an enduring, and DANGEROUS vision. Scholars tell us that if we can be sure about ANY of Jesus' words, we can be sure that the *Kingdom of God* was a major theme of his teachings; and it was the idea that got him killed.

In the Book of Acts, we have a description of the post-resurrection community of believers sharing everything in common; a community where no one was in need. But it did not last. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul teaches that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. 20 centuries later, we are STILL trying to work these out – and there are still many casualties of this process.

In the 4th century, the Christian hope for establishing God's Kingdom on earth took a dramatic and very concrete turn, when Emperor Constantine established the notion, and the reality, of a Christian King over a unified Church. The Church was then able to minister freely throughout the entire Mediterranean world. History has shown that the Church and the Emperor both succeeded beyond their wildest expectations – AND FAILED BEYOND THEIR DARKEST DOUBTS. For 1500 years, the kings of Europe vied to fill the shoes of this one, single, Christian emperor, and the Church constantly tried to put this Humpty-Dumpty empire back together again and again. Today, it is the guiding vision, and categorical mistake, of so-called *Christian* nationalism.

In the 5th century, Benedict and Scholastica established the first intentional, Christian communities in the West. These monasteries were places men and women flocked to by the thousands as an alternative to the violence rampant in their cities and villages. But we know from history that the prophetic witness and alternative lifestyle of the monasteries was repeatedly compromised as they slowly became institutional repositories of wealth, and power.

In the 12th century, Francis and Clare shook all of this up, by taking THAT prophetic, alternative lifestyle OUTSIDE the cloister, and into the fields and streets of Europe. After his death, the Church lost its nerve and forced the followers of Francis and Clare to become administrators of real estate, and social services.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, all of Europe was enflamed with the desire to purify the Church and unify God's people. Instead, Christendom blew apart into so many churches and nation-states, constantly at war with each other. The Pilgrims were a small group of refugees from these wars. While they founded New England upon a vision of the New Jerusalem, it later foundered on the rocks of the dispossession of Native Americans, and the Salem witch trials.

So, while this vision of the *Peaceable Kingdom* remains deeply powerful in the Christian imagination, we have yet to make it a stable reality. Maybe that is in the nature of all Spirit-inspired deeds: they start out good, but resist being institutionalized. Somehow the *peaceable kingdom* and the fruits of repentance have to be made real in each generation. History shows us what happens to our good ideas when we rest on our laurels: the *peaceable kingdom* becomes a grotesque caricature every time we try to institutionalize it.

So yes, over the millennia Christians have tried to realize this reign of justice and peace in many different ways. We all have ideas about what it should look like.

But WHAT MUST WE DO if we are to bear fruit worthy of repentance, and be on fire with the power of God's creative Spirit? What kind of power shall we exercise? What sort of justice will we seek? Looking at Isaiah's passage, perhaps we need to ask ourselves: what IS the spirit behind our actions? What is in our hearts when we do what we do? Better yet, just WHAT brings us joy? I mean, how can we embrace the Peaceable Kingdom without creativity, or wisdom, or love? Can we EVER transform the relationship between predator and prey, the lion and the lamb, the strong and the vulnerable, without investigating the very REAL PREDATORY FEELINGS we ALL carry inside? Remember, WE ARE an apex species – top of the food chain. By nature we are ALL predators, even the VEGANS.

Prayer is the first fruit of repentance. Prayer is the beginning of the *Peaceable Kingdom*. We have to examine all our actions in light of the SPIRIT behind them. Is it a competitive, predatory spirit, or a just, and compassionate one? Maybe ... it's a bit mixed?! And so, on this 2nd Sunday of Advent, let us bear worthy fruit, and pray for God's *peaceable kingdom*. Let us seek the Spirit of God in our hearts, and in the face of our neighbor.

This week, our calendar commemorated the life of a 17th century English deacon, Nicholas Ferrar (1592-1637). Ferrar lived at a tumultuous time. After a career working for the Virginia Company, he, his family and friends, decided to join together and devote themselves to a life of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. They found a village that had been emptied by the plague, and abandoned 2 centuries before. They moved into this ghost-town, called Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire. They bought the land and restored the ruins of an old chapel. Living around that chapel, men, women and children, married and single, ordained and lay, prayed throughout each day, worked to support themselves, and served the poor in the nearby villages. Little Gidding also became a refuge for political prisoners and refugees, offering safe harbor during the English Civil War. That Christian community lasted only 20 years. It was violently broken up by Oliver Cromwell's Puritans. BOTH the people who lived at Little Gidding, AND the Puritans who disbanded them, were devout Christians. They both deeply believed what they were doing would bring us all closer to a world of justice and peace. But the witness of Little Gidding endures. It was refounded in 1946, and it continues to inspire people. T.S. Eliot wrote about it, in his poem, *Four Quartets*:

*If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are **not** here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. **You are here to kneel**
Where prayer has been valid. And **prayer is more**
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.*

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*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. *

*And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well*

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