

David W. Lloyd: The End of the World Has Come! Hallelujah!

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The End of the World Has Come! Hallelujah!

Last week we were greeted with the confident assertion that “Christ is risen,” and we responded with “Christ is risen indeed.” It is highly unlikely that such a greeting and response was actually made that first Easter, and it is probable that it was not used for a number of weeks, and maybe not for months or years. Instead of the confident affirmation that we have exchanged, what we know from the Biblical account, and what we know of human nature, makes it highly likely that many of the disciples outside the inner group of 12 could not believe the resurrection. It is much more likely that they said, “Jesus is risen?” or perhaps as “Jesus is risen.” “Indeed?” For some of you, that may be what you were saying in your heart even as you joined in the Easter affirmation.

Today I am inviting you to join with me in exploring the disciples’ developing understanding of Easter, of the end of the world as they understood it, the beginning of the Kingdom of God as they understood it, and the implications of that understanding for them – and for us.

It is reasonable to assume that the disciples and Peter spent

a good portion of time after Easter either in Jerusalem or in Galilee in trying to make sense of what happened, reflecting on everything they had heard from him and experienced with him for the three years of his ministry. The most recent events – the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, the disturbance in the Temple with the moneychangers and the sellers of sacrificial animals, the teaching in the Temple and debates with the Pharisees and the rabbinical scholars, and then the last supper, the anguished prayer in the garden, the arrest, the torture by the Roman guards, and the crucifixion – must have through their heads over and over. Why did Jesus die? How is it possible that he is risen from the tomb? Now that is he risen and appearing to them, what does it all mean?

Luke's account of Easter has a key piece of information for us to answer these questions. Cleopas and the other disciple on the road to Emmaus had told the stranger walking with them – who they later recognized as Jesus – that Jesus was a great prophet. "We had been hoping that he was the one to liberate Israel." This hope of liberation from Roman rule was the central theme that bound the disciples to him and drew the crowds during his travels in Galilee and Judea.

For the central fact of their lives was their suffering under Roman occupation. Here, in the land that God had promised to their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, the land to which their ancestors Moses and Joshua had brought them from Egypt in their first great liberation, the land in which their ancestors David and Solomon had had the golden age of their people, the land to which their ancestors had returned under Nehemiah and Ezra after the captivity in Babylon, the land from which their ancestors under the Maccabees had expelled the Greek tyrants, they were oppressed once again by a foreign army.

Roman occupation was a financial burden. On top of the taxes they had to pay to the Sadducees to maintain the Temple rites, they had to pay taxes to the Roman Empire. The combination of

taxes was about a third of their income. Worse, the coins with which the Roman taxes were paid had Caesar's image, with the blasphemy, "Caesar is God."

There were several broad strands of response to Roman rule. The first was sullen acceptance. The Sadducees were the aristocracy in Jerusalem, responsible for maintaining order. There was no way that they could do this without some accommodation to the Romans. The priests responsible for conducting the Temple worship and its sacrifices, as required by the teaching of Moses were mostly Sadducees. They followed Moses' teachings, but where those teachings were vague, they were inclined not to interpret them in a way that caused unnecessary conflict with the Roman authorities.

A second response was violent insurrection. Throughout Roman rule, Jews rebelled on numerous occasions, culminating in the rebellion that brought the final destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. The Romans did not take the threat of insurrection lightly, and they executed numerous prophets and killed the crowds who had gathered around them in Galilee and Judea. The Romans were well aware of the symbolic importance of Passover, the commemoration of the great liberation from another oppressor, ancient Egypt. The Roman governor Pilate left his usual palace in Caesarea Philippi, with a large number of Roman troops, to take up temporary residence in Jerusalem and keep a watchful eye on the thousands of Jewish pilgrims. Think of the throngs of Muslims on hajj to Mecca. Think of the tension in Karbala, Iraq as the Shiites have been demonstrating for the U.S. troops to leave. You can imagine how tense the Romans were during Passover.

A third response was to become ultra orthodox, to follow Moses' teachings to the fullest extent possible, to keep oneself separate from Roman rule and Greek culture. Where Moses' teachings were unclear, the orthodox response was to follow the oral interpretations that had developed over the centuries that clarified what should and should not be done.

If one followed the oral interpretations faithfully, one had automatically followed the original teachings. The goal was not to be legalistic for its own sake, but to be obedient to what God had commanded. This was the approach of the Pharisees, who tried to explain Jewish suffering by claiming that it was due to the peoples' disobedience to God, their failure to follow faithfully Moses' teachings. Nevertheless, this was ultimately unsatisfactory because God punished those who were righteous along with the unrighteous, and surrounding nations who had never followed God's law were prospering without any suffering.

During the time of the Maccabees, a different explanation had emerged – God was not making his people suffer, it was another superhuman power that was doing it, God's enemy, Satan. For reasons that humans cannot know, God had temporarily given up some of his control over the universe to the evil one, who ruled the present age. Soon, **soon**, God would take back his power and restore his people in a new Kingdom of God on earth. In the time to come, there would be no suffering, no oppression, no hatred, no war, no disease, no death. Moreover, that Kingdom of God would never end. Unfortunately, no matter how hard they tried, humans could not bring about God's Kingdom. Only God could do that, using someone specially chosen and sent from heaven.

This dualistic view of the universe meant that everything and everyone was either with God or against God. There was nothing in between and no one could be a fence sitter. When the new Kingdom of God arrived, there would be a cosmic day of judgment. Everyone would have to give an account of his or her behavior to the one whom God had chosen and sent from heaven to be a cosmic divine judge. This even applied to the dead. God would bring the dead back to life and demand an accounting from them. What the living could do that the dead could not was to repent, to turn away from their current path and instead take the path of righteousness. For those who were

already faithful, the coming Kingdom of God would be good news, gospel.

This is familiar. It is Jesus' teaching, as reflected in the gospels, and its traditional Christian doctrine according to Paul, and it is the revelation to John – the apocalypse. Jesus and early Christians were not the only ones who held this belief. It was quite common in Jesus' day. The disciples probably believed in this dualistic view of the universe before they met Jesus, and he probably called them to be his disciples because they were already believers in it.

We need to be clear about one thing. Jesus and the other apocalypticists believed that the Kingdom of God would be a real, physical kingdom on earth, not just in heaven where God already ruled, and not just a kingdom in our hearts, either. He uses real down to earth language – people eat, drink and talk in the Kingdom, the disciples will sit on thrones in the kingdom, power will be exercised in the Kingdom.

As Jesus taught it, the Kingdom of God was a kingdom of reversals, where the first were last and the last first, where the high and mighty were ignored and the lowly, dispossessed, and powerless were the blessed ones. It was a kingdom of inclusion, where everyone was included in table fellowship, those with social position and impeccable behavior and those who had been social outcasts. It was a kingdom of forgiveness for those who had sinned, a place of fresh starts. It was a kingdom of two great commandments. One great commandment summed up all of the Mosaic teaching and the prophets: to love God with one's whole heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. A second great commandment was of equal weight: to love one's neighbor as one loved oneself. What hearers needed to do was get ready to enter the Kingdom – it was coming so soon that it was here already! Right here, right now! How should they get ready to enter the Kingdom of God? By repenting and behaving as they would behave in the new Kingdom. Outcasts will eat at table with the righteous in the new Kingdom, so have them join

us now. Sinners will be forgiven in the new Kingdom, so forgive them now. For the disciples, this was heady stuff. Living in this new way was exciting, it different from anything that they had known. It was a foretaste of the Kingdom. Moreover, they were the ones to whom all this had been revealed – hick folks from the backwater of Galilee. Even better, they were going to rule in the new Kingdom of God – both Matthew's and Luke's gospels attest to it.

The Pharisees disagreed with Jesus over his vision of what the Kingdom of God was like, but they did not put him to death. It was the Sadducees, the authorities who maintained the Temple rituals and bureaucracy, who put the Roman political authorities up to it. Why did the Sadducees do this? Well, they had power, and in Jesus' kingdom, they would no longer have power. Jesus saw the whole Temple system of tithes – taxes – and priesthood from father to son, and the economic system of money changing and selling of animals for sacrifice as absolutely contrary to God's Kingdom, because it maintained a system that oppressed the poor, uneducated, sick and sinful. Jesus preached that God would destroy the Temple, and during Holy Week, in the political and religious capital itself, Jesus symbolically attacked the whole structure of Temple worship when he upset the tables of the moneychangers and drove out the animal vendors.

If we have learned nothing else about human behavior, it is that people with power hold onto their power tenaciously, and they will do almost anything to keep it. Saddam Hussein allowed his people to suffer from a lack of food and medicine, resulting from UN sanctions imposed after the Gulf War, while he built palaces and his henchmen secreted millions of dollars. Last week we had an example – the leadership of American Airlines had planned to make sure that their executives would keep bonuses, even after bankruptcy, while they were making there unionized and non-unionized employees withstand the worst of concessions and potential lost jobs

after bankruptcy.

The Sadducees were no different. They didn't believe that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God would come true, but they knew that he was a troublemaker and was getting larger and larger crowds during a time when the Romans were especially likely to act with force. The Romans would likely hold the Sadducees somewhat responsible for any disturbance. When the Sadducees learned that the disciples would be the rulers in the new Kingdom of God, and since they could not be greater than their master, Jesus would be the primary ruler, the king of kings, they were incensed. Moreover, Jesus' vision of the new political structure was not only blasphemous, but it was legitimate grounds for the Romans to crucify him for fomenting rebellion.

Therefore, Jesus had been a prophet of the apocalypse. All his teaching is about the Kingdom of God, how precious it is and how we get there. More than a prophet – a great man of God who had taught his disciples that the end of the current world was coming, had already come, and how to behave in the new Kingdom of God. In that new Kingdom, which would be ushered in by a leader specially chosen and sent from heaven by God, all of the cosmic forces of evil would be destroyed, and there would be a judgment day in which the dead would be brought back to life.

Now to his closest followers, apocalypticists all, Jesus had appeared, living, after his death. He had been brought back to life. They had seen him. Even those like Thomas who were not convinced at first had now seen him.

What did it all mean? It took some time for the disciples to understand what had happened, but their reasoning must have gone something like this: If Jesus was alive again, the Day of Judgment was coming soon. Jesus was a great man of God – he must have been the chosen one, sent by God. Studying the scriptures, and looking back over the last three years, they

could see how his life and his teachings had matched many of the sacred texts and had sometimes been predicted by the prophets and in the Psalms. That proved it! Jesus was the Son of God! He had cast out demons – the helpers of Satan – and now he had overcome death, so he must have defeated the cosmic forces of evil. There it is, the proof that the Kingdom of God had really come! Each time they said, “Christ is risen,” they knew what it meant – the Kingdom of God had been ushered in. “Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah!”

So how should the followers of Jesus behave now that they knew this? They should live in the Kingdom of God the way Jesus, clearly the chosen one sent by God, had taught them. They should be united in heart and soul. They should not hold onto any of their own possessions, but should share them in the way Jesus taught them when he was first with them, or sell them and use the proceeds to make sure that the needy had enough.

Where does that leave us? To be a Christian is more than merely believing that Jesus’ teachings are a moral guide for us. To be a Christian is more than merely believing that Jesus arose from the dead. To be a Christian is to embrace the cosmic view of God’s salvation, as the disciples eventually did after Easter, even if it is not exactly the apocalypse in which Jesus believed.

The ultimate issues for us are whether we believe in the Kingdom of God, and whether we believe that **we** are already in the Kingdom of God **now**. Moreover, if we do, don’t we know how we should behave? Shouldn’t we be living in the Kingdom of God the way Jesus taught his disciples? Shouldn’t we be united in heart and soul? Shouldn’t we be sharing our possessions or selling them and using the proceeds to make sure that the needy have enough? If I claim to be a Christian, shouldn’t I be willing to give up my status, my privilege, my income?

The gospels of Mark and Matthew both end with God instructing the disciples to go back to Galilee, to meet Jesus again for

the first time, as Marcus Borg would say. We will get plenty of instruction on how to live in the Kingdom of God, if we dare to open our hearts to Jesus' message.

Christ is risen. The end of the world has come. Let us enter into the Kingdom of God!