

Red Sky in the Morning

Tuesday morning, if you were up early, you would have witnessed the most gorgeous pink-red dawn you have ever seen. It reminded me of something my father would say:

Red sky in the morning is the sailor's warning,

Red sky at night is the sailor's delight.

The old proverb is reminiscent of, if not actually *based upon* Jesus' words in Luke 12 (54-56) that form the preface to our passage. Jesus is on a *journey* to the cross. The significance of the cross for the world was, at that moment of course, yet to be seen; but the *cross* would change everything, for better or worse, for every man, woman and child. The cross would *seal* God's New Covenant in Jesus' blood. For Israel, *old* testament people, God would still be *their* god – unchanged. His love for Israel would not miss a single heartbeat; but *at the* cross things would *change*. And *they*, the people of Israel, would have to give up the *old* way of being Israel, leave *behind* their national politics and aims and goals to follow Jesus the Christ. "Trust me, follow me," he would say to them. Continue to be part of *this* community, this *communion with God* that began in the Garden of Eden with people alienated from God, people who God brought *back* into *communion*. A community that went from slavery to exodus, from exodus to wilderness, from wilderness to promised land, from promised land to exile, and from exile to where they are right now: a people physically present in their ancestral homeland, yet *out* of spiritual touch with God. *That* is about to change at the cross.

So Jesus calls for *repentance* that will gather them back to them as the New Testament People of God. This is why, on the night he was betrayed he took the cup and said, "this is the blood of the *New Covenant* . . . "

You and I who follow Jesus today belong to *this* story, and therefore belong to this *community* – this *communion* of the saints. We are in this story. Israel's story is *our* story. Our spiritual commitment to the God of the Bible means we see *our* lives through the lens of Scripture. We go back to those first disciples of Jesus in those last critical days before the cross, when the sky was red in the morning. The signs of the times were all pointing in one direction. In *those* days, what those who would follow Christ needed was . . .

Discernment

This story that Jesus was telling them in parables and predictions and by interpreting to them current events, was not sterile philosophical truth; neither was it general life principles – equally applicable to all people at all times. No the "times" they needed discernment about refers to the specific moment in which he and his followers now live. The cross is about to change everything.

He tells them that from this point on, there will be a *division* within Israel – an invisible *wedge* will be driven right through Israel's midst. Some of her citizens, if not most, would wouldn't read the writing on the wall, never clue-in to the tell-tale signs, never realize that for Israel, the crucial hour had come. Some would never discern the meaning of the cross.

Without a doubt Jesus intended his hearers to *expect* the imminent arrival of long awaited "Day of the LORD" – the return of Israel's god to his Temple and to his city. This was something the prophets long foretold; and they had better beware of the awesome consequence should that day dawn, and they not be *ready*.

But our question as we study this text is, what time *was* it? At what stage in the process did Jesus believe he and his followers to be living? What is there about these "*times*" does he

hope they will be aware of?

Jesus is not a “fortune-teller.” Biblical prophets are a different breed altogether from the pagan soothsayers of that day. The role of the biblical prophet – even Jesus – is a speaking forth of what God wants people to hear at any given moment. Their future is heading *somewhere*, but what that future will bring for individuals remains unwritten. Jesus does, nevertheless, seem believe that *he* could discern where things are heading and he also seems to expect his followers to do the same. Why? Because the *Spirit works* in all times and all places. And right now Israel’s god is about to *act*. The day of the LORD will come.

Converging in the life of Jesus is the fulfillment of so many of Scriptures. His work is heading towards *something* and *soon*, and if his hearers aren’t careful, it will catch them up like a thief in the night!

So how can they be ready? What will put them in the place where they need to be to be able discern the times? Jesus can reduce it to just one word:

Repentance

If they only understood the “times” ; if they only knew what God was planning in the cross, they would come to terms quickly with their enemies rather than risk total ruin. They must, at all costs, avoid the disastrous events that will bring slaughter into the Temple, the crash of falling buildings down around their heads. Jesus can *foresee* a singular crisis which would mean certain death for *him*, but *also* a sorting out of all who would follow him, the true from the false. A judgement on all Israel. The cross would change everything.

The *cross* would be the turning point, the *wedge of division*, the irrevocable act of God in after which one would either take up the cross and follow Jesus the Christ, or fail to recognize God’s Son at his coming and thereby face a judgement which could obviously *not* come, until some time *after* his death; and even Jesus didn’t know exactly when, but it’s *coming*. And therefore from a heart of passionate love he pleads with friend and foe alike to please be ready. Repent.

It literally means to “turn around” – change one’s thinking. And what a change in thinking it required! God is bringing his kingdom to earth in and through Jesus. This would leave the self-appointed guardians of Israel’s religious tradition on the other side of the fence. Israel’s boundary lines were being *redrawn*, and to be left on the *outside* was the road to ruin.

He compares the present situation to one being sued in court. Israel, he says, had better settle accounts with God *before* she lands herself in jail. What we read in 12:57-59 about going to the magistrate with your accuser is about *Israel* and *God*. God is the plaintive, Israel the accused. It’s not a lesson in personal finances. He’s not giving advise on how to stay out of debt. It’s a metaphor. God has filed an indictment against the nation: whosoever would refuse to come to God through the *cross of Jesus*, whosoever would not accept the new way of being the people of God, for them, it would soon be too late. It would be as if they were thrown in jail, and they threw away the key!

Which brings us to our main text today in 13:1-9 in which certain people have come to Jesus who like Jesus. . .

Suffering under Pontius Pilate

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Pontius Pilate caused untold suffering. The first time he came to town with his soldiers he allowed them to carry their insignias bearing the *image* of the Caesar. These regimental standards were considered *idols*. The Jews never allowed statues or images into their city. He took sacred money from the Temple and used it to build a water system. Pilate was a profane man. He eventually executed so many Jews as governor of Judea that his superior, the imperial legate, removed him from office and sent him off to Rome to give account. So these people bring to Jesus the latest grim headline of the Pontius Pilate era.

People from Jesus' own home region – Galileans – perhaps even people he knew personally – *slain* on Pilate's order in the very act of worship. A peaceful act ended by a cruel blow: one more evidence their world is falling apart.

What's *implied* in hear as they tell Jesus about this outrage is, How long are we going to put-up with this? And, (again implied) If you're Messiah, what are *you* going to do about it? *Your* people are suffering under Pontius Pilate.

In response Jesus says, you better re-think what you're thinking. Don't think for a moment you can win against Pilate on his terms. If you don't repent, you too will perish.

Now, these people so outraged by this atrocity are not being singled out as being *especially* in need of repentance. Jesus is calling for a certain kind of repentance. There is, of course, the kind of repentance that we all need if we become aware of a sin and decide to say sorry and make amends. But *these* people are living under a torture state. They are, "suffering under Pontius Pilate." You can't say that their grievances are petty or unwarranted. *Something* needs to be done. But what Jesus says needs to be done is not what they think. So what kind of repentance is God requiring of them?

He is calling for the repentance of *a nation*. It's a call to Israel to abandon one set of agendas to embrace another. The daily headlines, the grim realities of suffering under Pontius Pilate were leading many in Israel to say, enough is enough, let's take up the sword! Let's fight for our lives and for the restoration of Israel!

They thought that would bring in the kingdom of God. But Jesus says, *no*. You better re-think that. Because your solution doesn't really deal with . . .

The Problem of Evil

He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Those victims of violence in the temple were no more deserving of it than those killed in natural disasters – like when there's an earthquake and a building collapses. But there is something they do need to repent of. Something they need to re-think about life in a fallen world. What was it?

Like previous prophets of Jewish restoration like John the Baptist, Jesus summoned the *nation*, in view of a looming judgement, to give up their violent rebellion against Rome. Mess with the bull, and you'll get the horns. But what are they supposed to do? When people cry out in powerless anguish? When things go from bad to worse? When their place of worship is violated? When their cherished values are reviled. When cornered even the meekest animal will fight for it's life. But what despair settles in when there's no real hope of winning!

Is there some other way to deal with evil? What possible hope can Jesus offer those who suffer under Pontius Pilate? It's found in the word. . .that hope.

Unless

Unless you repent you will perish. But if you do, the cross will change everything. They could follow Jesus, trust *his way* of dealing with evil. Then they could emerge from the coming day as the vindicated people of God. Jesus would bear in his body the sins of the world. If they rethink their national struggle in the light of his cross, their world would change. If not, they would face a devastating judgment, and be crushed beneath the heels of Rome.

Now these words of Jesus refer to those times, and those people. But we too are in this story. We too must re-think how we live in our world today. We all, in one way or another, “suffer under Pontius Pilate”. And before we get to the Good News of these words of Jesus, and there is Good News, we must get there by way of a rather. . .

Pessimist parable

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "

I say pessimist, because for that generation of Jews, this is their very last chance. In Mark's Gospel we read how one day Jesus searched a fig tree for fruit, found none, and by the next day that tree had withered up and died. (Mark 11:12-14,20,21) To understand what this meant to those people we need only realize that the fig tree was Israel's national symbol – like the maple leaf is for us. The parable is about how spiritual life in the days of Jesus had ceased to be able to grow in that place. It says in Mark “Jesus was *hungry*, but there was no fig.” The life of the Spirit could no longer trickle up through Israel's cultural soil. In this parable Jesus is now predicting the destruction of the city and its temple. In Jesus, God came looking for spiritual fruit and found none.

Now, as I said at the outset, you and I belong in *this* story. Israel's story is *our* story. So if we follow through on that, we can take away from this rather pessimistic parable a positive message about what I call . . .

Enriching our cultural soil

This parable is about a culture. It's about how *our* culture surrounds the church like soil. I've always been interested in compost. Right now I can't wait for my compost pile to start working. That's because I know the secret to a great garden is the compost. It's all in the manure. Without it, soil is sterile – try growing something in beach sand - it won't work. It's the compost that enriches the soil.

Sometimes we in the church blame our culture for whatever problems we face in bringing the Gospel to our neighbours. But let's not allow the soil of our culture become an excuse for shifting the blame away from our need for personal, spiritual renewal. It's easy to go about making it known what we are against in the mainstream. It's not that hard to point out the trashy parts and the dangerous influences we must avoid. It's awfully easy to call “this world” to repentance. But the gardener in the parable says, “let me put some manure in the soil. Let me dig it in.

Actually, human culture is neutral. It's the *soil*. It's what we put into our culture that will make it either fertile or toxic to the Gospel. Are we enriching our culture? Could it possibly be

we are robbing our culture of the nutrients it needs?

In 1904, a group of Swedish people met in a wonderful new church on Logan Ave. in Winnipeg's north end. They had come as immigrants, moved into the neighbourhood, started a church. They worked in the stock-yards, the grain elevators. They were carpenters, bricklayers, mother's, shopkeepers. But most of all, they were Christians. Their faith taught them that they couldn't just show up on Sunday, sing some wonderful hymns and then go home. They were determined to dig into soil of that community and enrich it. For years that church enriched that community.

A hundred years later, I stood in that musty, old, abandoned sanctuary in Winnipeg. I could almost feel the presence of the saints, almost hear the preachers, the joyous singing . . . but now, that old church on Logan Ave. was a vacant and dusty. . .

And outside was one of the meanest streets in Canada. You know what happens: the old saints lived and died enriching that neighbourhood embodying the presence of Christ, but they grew old, *their* children moved away to suburbs or other cities. Over the years, the neighbourhood goes downhill. Today, street gangs spray their graffiti, the sidewalks and alleyways are littered with syringes and condoms. It's one of those neighbourhoods you just don't want to be in after dark.

But when I first started to pastor 25 years ago, there was a skinny little kid in the Rainy River church. His name was Jamie Ricci. He was really expressive and energetic! He had such dramatic talent. We watched Jamie grow, commit his life to God, go out on mission trips. Then he meets a beautiful girl from Australia, they get married, and after much prayer discern God is calling them to go and live and be the church in Winnipeg's north end.

So they moved in to the same old neighbourhood where a hundred years before those Swedish people had gone and lived and worked. They buy an old house. The first couple nights in the house, neighbourhood kids throw stones through the windows because they think the house is still empty and abandoned. But no. Not any more. There's new people in the neighbourhood. Jamie and his wife start an urban outreach. They bring teams of youth there to reach out to the street kids, the drug addicts, the poor. They're still there. They plan to raise their family there.

We can't afford to be critical of where our culture is heading unless we are also willing to get our hands dirty and dig and dung our cultural soil. Isn't that dangerous? Isn't most of what we see in pop culture trash and just a waste of time? We know it is. But who will say "Lord, let me dig around and dung it . . ."