

## The Invasion of the World

Just across the street from the Covenant church in Surrey, is a Sikh house of worship. A few blocks away, is this Hindu temple. Last weekend at the Conference, retired Superintendent Keith Fullerton took us around to visit these places. It made me wonder: when we enter the sacred space of those of other faiths, is God any less present? Is the Satan any more present than in our own house of worship? Perhaps the boundaries are not as clear as we think.

In the book of Acts, the Christians both critiqued the Jewish Temple, yet continued to worship there. They were believers who were Jewish and saw no reason to disassociate themselves from Judaism. They regarded themselves a true *part* of Israel – indeed as the *true* people of God.

Another interesting experience at the conference, was listening to the guest speaker Yohanna Katanacho, a Palestinian who lives in Nazareth. (Yes, *the* Nazareth). He teaches in a Bible college there. His seminar was called "Owner of the Land." This farming brother I know from Saskatchewan went to this session because he thought it was going to be about agriculture. But he soon realized it was not what he thought. Yohanna gave a compelling presentation of biblical thought on how Jesus is the centre of our hope and that he *owns all the earth*. The heart of God, revealed in Jesus is to be our passion. The coming of the kingdom of God on earth is not an intellectual puzzle about the end times and fulfillment of prophecy. God's plan for the Jews is for them to love the Palestinians and same plan for the Palestinians – to love the Jews. In our world of many faiths, hatred of others never accomplishes anything. The Gospel is God's *invasion of love* upon the whole world. But in a pluralistic society such as ours, some would have us see other faiths simply as . . . .

### Other doors in the hallway

All religious faiths teach some form of afterlife. One either "goes to heaven" or one "enters Nirvana" or some other blissful state or abode. So, if all we believe as Christians is that we "go to heaven when we die," then why should we quibble with good living people of other faiths? Why play this senseless game of "my heaven's better than your heaven"? Why fight over belief? In a pluralistic society, one is pressured towards a generally accepted assumption that the world's other faiths merely offer us a *choice* between various doors in long the hallway all of which open on the other side *into in same big room*. And since no one really knows, on this side, what that other side looks like, it should be easy as Christians to go along with that generally accepted assumption so prevalent in our society . . . . *if all* we believed is that we "go to heaven when we die."

But that, however, is not what the New Testament teaches. That's the rub. Herein lies the entire struggle Christians have faced in dialogue with people of other faiths, a dialogue that began so long ago in Jerusalem between Peter and John and the Jewish ruling council.

What the Sadducees, who are the dominant party within the Jewish ruling council, particularly object to is the apostle's teaching about *the resurrection*. Sadducees didn't believe in such a thing. So this was the first objection to be raised against the claims the apostles were making about Jesus, and it remains the chief distinction between Christian faith and other faiths. If, at death, all the doors in the hallway open onto the same place, then our message can claim no special status or transformational power over those of other faiths.

**But** an *empty tomb* poses a far more thought provoking question than any that has ever been raised. A risen Jesus Christ with a transformed physical body that is part of a new creation,

yet still bearing the scars of the old, is a truly unique reality. A man who has gone through the door to the other side *and come back out again*, ah, if *that* really happened, now *that* would be something to talk about! That would say something about the nature of God and what lies ahead for each of us.

But in the mainstream of Western culture, the resurrection of Jesus is no longer considered by most an historical fact. It has become a mere dogmatic statement. On Easter Sunday the evening news typically show various Christians doing various ceremonial things and reports that "Easter is commemorated as the day *Christians* believe Jesus rose from the dead." (Just for your information.) But for *Peter and John* the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection was .

### **Truth spoken to power**

Many of the *common* people of Jesus' day, and certainly the Pharisees, believed in a great revelation at the coming of Messiah. At the end of the age the dead would rise. But this morning, Peter and John are not standing before a sympathetic audience common folk, but: "the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family." These men represent nobility, power and wealth. The intellectual elite. They rule the Temple and Jewish religious life and they are demanding of the two disciples, "by what *power* or what *name* did you do this?"

So consider this uneven match: In this corner, (weighing in at 250 lbs) are three groups: the scribes, who are experts in interpreting traditional law. Pharisees who are fanatics in observing it. And the *priestly families*, rich, influential and pretty-well used getting their own way regardless of their personal piety. A who's who of Israelite religion.

And in this corner, (wearing the shabby red trunks) a couple of Galilean fishermen who have just been hauled out of out of jail. But what follows is a match for the ages, a remarkable act of courage before the most powerful and intellectually astute people in the land. It may *appear* that Peter and John are badly outnumbered, and therefore the question *does* seem to have a certain legitimacy: "by what power or what name did you do this?"

Now, what they had *done* was . . . .

### **Heal**

But more importantly, they had done this in a very public and Jewish place: a gate leading into the Temple. They'd been arriving for prayers when this beggar asked for alms, and Peter had said, "Silver and gold I have none, but what I do have I give to you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk", *and the man did*. In fact he started leaping and dancing all over the place.

This was a wonderful thing, but it was quickly interpreted by the public witnessing it as a significant "*sign*." And because it was done in a very *Jewish* place – the Temple – it was surely a sign to the *nation of Israel*. And what was this sign saying? Well, that poor man had sat in the Beautiful Gate day after day. He was a *fixture* there. Every day the best of Jewish religion and the best of Jewish religious people had walked right by him no one could give him anything more than a few coins. But now the apostles had *cured* him in Jesus' name. This meant that *power* to heal that Jesus had possessed in his earthly life was now operative in his followers. And for the crowd looking on, this was sure proof that the *messianic age* had truly begun, because the prophet Isaiah had once said that when the age of Messiah dawned, "the *lame* would leap like a deer". (Isa 35:6)

So surely this *leaping lame man* was a sign to Israel that pointed to . . .

### **The spiritual bankruptcy of those who ruled the Temple.**

This sign was interpreted as a serious indictment against the Jewish leaders. Here's an interesting little story: One day Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the 13<sup>th</sup> century dropped in on the *Pope* – Pope Innocent II – who, that day, happened to be counting a enormous sum of money.

“You see, Thomas,” said the Pope, “the Church can no longer say, ‘silver and gold I have none.’”

“True, Holy Father,” Thomas replied, “*and neither can she now say, ‘rise up and walk.’*”

And it's the same sense of impotence and futility that is now staring the Temple leaders in the face. So they did what all bullies do when confronted with the reality that they are small and insignificant after all, what all bullies do when their insecurities rise to the surface: they used oppressive force and had the apostles who healed this man thrown in jail.

But the horse was already out of the barn. Nothing could change the fact that a crippled man was now leaping around for joy because *Jesus* had been glorified. From his place of exaltation in heaven he had endowed his disciples with power to heal in his name.

### **What is "power"?**

There is something flowing through the universe that's bigger than us. Stronger than us. Knows more than we do. We all try to connect with it, somehow. If we do in the wrong way, power will destroy us. But if we do it in the *right* way it can *empower us*. If we're connected, we can do things that in and of ourselves we know we could never do. But is the power ever ours? Or does it just *pass through* us like electricity through these wires. And when it does, does it ever leave us unchanged for having coursed through our beings? Are we *better people* for having possessed it? or *worse*? Does it ennoble us, or corrupt us? And where can it be found? In a conversation with a friend? In a temple? A church? What *is* power? Preachers claim to preach with it. Do they have it? Politicians run from door to door asking us to *give it* to them. Do they ever really get it?

Luke in writing these words in the book of Acts answers the “power question.” It was . . .

### **The Holy Spirit**

Then Peter, filled with the *Holy Spirit*, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed."

When Jesus spoke, they said, “this man speaks *words with power*, not like the scribes and Pharisees.” That must have really riled up the rulers. And now the disciples seem to have this same ability.

But if all the rulers wanted to know was how the crippled man was healed, that was easy. They could have simply said, “we are disciples of Jesus and when he died, we inherited his healing power”. That would have been easy enough for the rulers to understand and even accept in terms of the superstitions and magical arts that were a common part of the first century world-view.

But the *fulness of the Spirit* allowed the apostle's take this one step further: For Jesus had given them the assurance that when they came to such situations, they would be given just the right words to say. So the Spirit *led them*. For they are facing unrelenting and implacable opponents who will not back down or show them any mercy whatsoever. Therefore, the best defense is a good offense. So note carefully it was not simply "Jesus of Nazareth" in whose name they had done this. A Galilean rabbi could have easily been written off as just another hokey faith-healer from the hills. No. It was "Jesus **MESSIAH** of Nazareth".

And to press the point even further, Peter reminds them that they are very men who had rejected Jesus claim to *be* Messiah, judged him a blasphemous man, and had him crucified. But he is nevertheless "Jesus MESSIAH of Nazareth." He is the one to whom all Scriptures point. And in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, Peter pressed forward the invading force of God into the world with a well known verse that leaves now doubt as to . . .

### **Who Jesus is**

He is "the *stone you builders rejected*." The verse is **Psalm 118:22** and originally, in this psalm, the *stone* was symbolic of the *nation* of Israel, which was despised by the other nations. But this stone was to be the *basis* for the government of the world. But, as the disciples will do with all the other prophecies, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this verse is re-interpreted so that the purpose of God for *Israel* finds its actual fulfilment in the single-handed work of *Jesus Christ*. One man had risen from the dead having won salvation for all nations.

The one they had despised and rejected is now glorified and from him alone could true salvation come – not only physical healing, but healing of *the creation* from the disease of sin. On the cross, the Jesus' faithful death made atonement for sin and his vindication by God had been proven him rising him from the dead. The one *they* had so cruelly rejected has become. . .

### **The cornerstone.**

"For salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved."

Now, as I said at the outset, often in the modern West, "salvation" simply means, for many, "going to heaven when you die." But the word "salvation" meant something very different to the Jews of the first century ( not just to Peter and John, but also to the Sadducees and Pharisees).

The Pharisees, actually agreed with the Christians that *salvation* would involve a resurrection of the dead at the end of time, a great renewal in which the present state of the creation would be radically altered. Like Jesus and his follower, the Pharisees envisioned a day when sin and death would be removed from the equation. The faithful dead would rise and not spend eternity in a shadowy underworld, or even in some disembodied state beyond the skies, but as inhabitants of *the new heavens and the new earth*. Creation would once again have beauty and splendor and harmony and communion with God.

Now, the *Sadducees*, on the other hand, had a far more secular vision. Not believing in any resurrection, they sought salvation in maintain the political status quo, holding on to power, both social and economic. And what worried *the Sadducees* the most about these Galileans preaching the resurrection of Jesus was how this might cause a power shift within the nation. Could a popular movement, perhaps a coalition of Christians and Pharisees, shake the foundations of *Sadducean* power?

But what really threatens them is not any popular uprising, but the invasion of God upon the earth. For they are, in the words of Psalm 118 . . .

### **The builders**

And their “building” is about to be shaken by an earthquake of such magnitude that will expose the shoddiness of their power structures. In Hebrew the word translated “cornerstone” is not a picture of a foundation stone laid at the *base* of a building but rather the pinnacle stone, the capstone at the top of an arch. The stone that holds everything up. Figuratively, it referred to a chieftain or a king, a *leader* who could hold the tribe or nation together. No matter how solid the other stones may be, if the capstone crumbles, the whole thing comes down. And they had rejected “Jesus Messiah of Nazareth.”

When it comes to leaders, “many are called, but few who are chosen,” Christ said. Many in our world sense the urging to lead others, and are driven to show the others the way. But lead them where? And why? Why do you *want* to lead others? Why *should* they listen to you? Few pass the smell test on these questions. Our world is full of self-absorbed so-and-so's who wish nothing more than the rest of us to sit quietly while they say what's what. But thank God, there are *some* who can sit in the chair or stand in the pulpit or run around adjusting thermostats or who teach the children's lesson who *are leaders under God*. They did not choose this. It chose *them*. Are you one? Am I? We all *can* be. Maybe not to nations or big corporations. But to our children. Our neighbourhood. Our Team.

How? As we come to the Lord 's Table, let us just sit and BE in the kingdom for a moment. Think of where those around you *could* be if *we* here this morning, at this Table, find the kingdom way follow it. Then, as we walk along this long hallway with so many doors, so many distractions and confusions, we can point to Jesus and say *this* door leads to . . .

### **A New Creation**

The unabashed courage of Peter and John before the Jewish ruler has no other explanation except as an authentic witness to Jesus risen from the dead. And as we break this bread and drink this cup, we are making the exact same declaration. We are born of the Spirit in Jesus name. God's invasion of the world is still going on *right here*. When we eat and drink at this table, we don't simply remember a long-dead Jesus; we celebrate the presence of the living Lord. And he lives through the resurrection as one who has gone through the door, into the new creation, the transformed world. And now he comes back to us with fresh food and drink to nourish within us the very beginnings of God's new world.

So what will we *do* with the strength we will draw from partaking is these first-fruits of the new creation that Jesus serves to us here? Romans 8 says that the creation is groaning in travail as it waits for it's redemption. Creations is scarred by human greed, torn by our conflicts, beaten down by our injustices.

But one part of the old creation has *already been transformed*: already been invaded and occupied and liberated from the bondage to decay – the *body of Christ*, the body that died on the cross and that death can no longer touch. Jesus has gone ahead of us through the door into the new creation and as we look back at his death though the lens of this *meal* that he shared on the night he was betrayed, we find that he *meets us here* and that we become *part of* the invasion – carriers and vessels of the new creation.

But when Jesus rose from the dead, as the first-fruits of the new creation, his body still

bore *scars* from the old which was how he was recognized by his followers. And so too, the new earth will still bear certain *scars* by which we will recognize it as the same place where we once lived but is now set free from sin and death. What *footprint* will we leave behind? And what evidence will there be that we were part of God's invasion of the world?