

Inhabiting the Time (Luke 21. 5-19)

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We're getting to the time of the church's year when our readings focus on what to expect of the future in light of the event of Christ. In the narrative time of the gospels, Jesus is nearing the end of his teaching ministry and his life. The gospels depict him as preparing his disciples for what will seem to be his catastrophic failure. He will be killed; they will be scattered; there will be no immediate overthrow of the powers that be or establishment of a new Israel. How does Jesus want them to live in that aftermath? What are they supposed to expect or hope for now?

For the early Christian communities, these weren't abstract theological questions. They were living them. As followers of Jesus, they found themselves on the edge of their former belonging, misunderstood by family and friends, sometimes persecuted and even killed by the governing authorities. And they found themselves in the midst of a more general social cataclysm. By the time the gospels were written, Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed by Rome. Was the current age was coming to an end? Was the new reign of God promised by Jesus about to be decisively inaugurated? Was this the time they could expect to be vindicated?

There was clearly a strand of thinking in the early church that anticipated a quick resolution of the issues here. Though they were afflicted now, Jesus would soon return, identify his faithful followers and reward them, while dealing with the wicked appropriately. It 'is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you', wrote Paul to the Thessalonians – in one of the earliest texts in the New Testament; 'when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Thess. 1.6-8).

But of course there's a problem with this so-called 'resolution'. Theologian James Alison has brilliantly explored how this gleeful anticipation of the vengeful

reappearing of the Lord is tied to a vision of God who divides the world into insiders and permanent outsiders, goodies and baddies; God as ‘just toward the righteous, and implacable with the [supposedly] iniquitous’.¹ But isn’t this precisely the vision of God that Jesus has called in question?

We know, Alison writes, that he did not accept ‘the social duality of his time, the division between good and evil, pure and impure, Jews and non-Jews. In fact, his practice and his teaching add up to a powerful subversion of this duality’.² It’s not that Jesus made no distinction between good and bad behaviour, between those who show mercy and those who do not. It’s just that, if his practice is anything to go by, his yearning desire was that all might be ultimately drawn into the banquet of heaven, all things reconciled. When he is afflicted, far from exacting vengeance on those who torment him, Jesus’ response is endlessly to keep open his heart in the hope of some future turning or conversion. ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’. Do we seriously think that God is any different? That the offer of redemption is time-limited – as if there’s an arbitrary, cosmic deadline in operation, after which no repentance, no transformation is possible?

But what then are we to make of the New Testament talk of end-times, the concern with God’s future arrival once and for all on the ‘day of the Lord’? Well, Alison’s suggestion – which I find persuasive – is this. Despite Jesus’ example, it took the early church a long time to figure out the implications of his subversion of the social dualisms of the day. It seems blindingly obvious to us that things like dietary laws, rules concerning circumcision and sabbath-keeping, are irrelevant to the new form of life and the sharing in God’s mercy that Jesus came to bring. But this wasn’t blindingly obvious to the first Christian communities – and there are many New Testament texts in which arguments over purity, over who’s in and who’s out, are played out.

¹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p.125. I’m indebted to James Alison for the title of this reflection as well as its central argument.

² Alison, *Raising Abel*, pp.125-126.

In a similar way, Alison suggests, it took time for the early Christian communities to reimagine the ‘temporal dualism’ they assumed between this age and the new age to come.³ In the framework they were used to, the future of God was imagined as breaking in to ‘this naughty world’ (as the Book of Common Prayer describes it) as a shock, usually violent and disruptive. For those who saw themselves as victims in the current age, this divine in-breaking was often hoped for in terms of vengeance and punishment for the wicked, rescue and vindication for them. Thus the apocalyptic imagination – still alive and well in parts of the Christian world. But if God has already come in the person of Jesus, if eternity has already entered the present age in the form of a humble and forgiving victim, then this temporal duality no longer makes much sense. What if there is no future shock to be anticipated, no divine reckoning yet to come? What if, instead, there remains only the slow process of discovering of what it means to live here and now as participants in a new age already inaugurated in the midst of the present time?

The passage we heard from Luke’s gospel seems consistent with this subtle shift in understanding, though perhaps the shift is not yet complete. Jesus mentions the future destruction of the temple, and some ask him ‘Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?’ These are questions proper to apocalyptic expectation, divine action discernible in calamity, sound and fury. But Jesus immediately pours cold water on this kind of excitement: ‘Beware that you are not led astray’. Many will come proclaiming their messianic credentials, announcing ‘the time is near’. ‘Do not go after them’. And although he goes on to speak in terms of the ‘end’, and the disorder that will continue to afflict the life of the world, ‘wars, famines, earthquakes and plagues’, ‘portents and great signs from heaven’, that’s not where he wants them to focus their attention. Because what’s actually ahead of them is something much less glamorous and exciting sounding, much more local and personal. People they know in the synagogue will hand them over; they’ll be betrayed ‘even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends’,

³ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.128.

‘hated’ because of their allegiance to him. Luke depicts Jesus’ questioners as interested in what will happen out there, in the realm of signs and wonders, as a new world is born. But Jesus focuses on what will happen to them – ‘they will arrest you and persecute you’. This is the future, he says, that you’re to anticipate. This is how God’s future must be wrought.

The question then becomes, how they’re to live in the face of this. How to be faithful to the glimpse they’ve had of God’s truth and love while suffering the rejection and incomprehension of a frightened, reactive age? Luke’s Jesus counsels them thus: ‘make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict’. In other words, let your speaking arise from deep listening, let your responses be sourced in communion with me. Don’t argue at the same level as your opponents, for you are called to testify to a different reality.

But notice what this doesn’t guarantee. Jesus does not promise that thus they will convince their persecutors to leave them alone. Indeed, he says, ‘they will put some of you to death’. Alison writes: ‘one of the temptations of the first Christians was to remain enclosed within the apocalyptic imagery, thinking in terms of a rapid, vengeful, and definitive return of Jesus’, hoping for rescue from on high.⁴ But, he goes on, as this way of thinking is subverted from within, we see in the New Testament ever less insistence on the hope of rescue and ever more insistence on the necessity of bearing the ‘crushing violence’ of the world as Jesus did.⁵

So rather than expecting God to rush in to resolve the tension of living between worlds, gradually there emerges a sense of disciples being empowered to forge a counter-history in the midst of this one. For this reason, Alison suggests, the words ‘patience’ (in the sense of suffering or undergoing) and ‘perseverance’ begin to appear in the apostolic texts. ‘It is not that hope [in God] is being abandoned’, he writes, ‘but rather that its inner structure’ is being transformed. Hope shifts from

⁴ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.162.

⁵ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.165.

being hope of rescue and vindication, to hope in the indefeasible faithfulness of God which empowers us, like Jesus, 'to risk suffering to bring light to the world'.⁶ Thus, the paradox Luke expresses: 'they will put some of you to death', yet 'not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls'.

And it seems to me that this profound shift in the structure of hope makes a real difference to how we too live amidst of the social cataclysms of our day and that we fear are yet to come. It makes a difference to how we live in and through the suffering that afflicts us personally – long or chronic illness, unmet desire for satisfying work or loving relationship, experiences of injustice, bullying and decline. From all this, we're not to look for rescue, as if God might one day appear and 'beam us up'. Rather, we're to learn how to inhabit the time of our lives in the power of God. This means, I think, not letting ourselves be fascinated by how terrible it all is and how distressed we are, but instead fixing our attention on the underlying and eternal reality of God's mercy and love. We're to undergo our suffering and fear, in a spirit of deep listening and receptivity; not creating unnecessary drama out of what's wrong or what's missing, but being patiently, perseveringly available to participate in the forging of a counter-story here and now. Sometimes our being this way affects the outcome – a situation is transformed as we wish; at other times, things do not overtly change. Yet something is wrought all the same – a quality of presence, an opening to possibility, the increase of light in our world.

⁶ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.166.