

JULY 5TH, 2020: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Zechariah 9:9-10 Romans 8:9, 11-13 Matthew 11:25-30

According to some traditions, during the official ceremony of General Cornwallis' October 19, 1791 surrender to George Washington at Yorktown, ending the Revolutionary War, the British got the last laugh. Its band sarcastically played a well-known musical ditty entitled *The World Turned Upside Down*. The song's lyrics pointed out the absurdity of the world's military giant surrendering to the 13 Colonies' ragtag army: "If buttercups buzzed after the bees, if boats were on land and churches on sea, if ponies rode men and grass ate the cows . . . then all the world would be upside down."

Whether that particular song was actually played during the surrender or not, *The World Turned Upside Down* could certainly be a valid subtitle for our Sacred Scriptures. Today's three sacred authors agree.

The prophet Zechariah sets the theme. Probably active shortly after the Chosen People's 6th century BCE Babylonian Exile, he paints an ideal picture of a restored Holy Land. But the Messiah/King he depicts isn't the leader most people are anticipating. Though "his dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River (the Euphrates) to the ends of the earth," he won't be a king who depends on military might. According to Zechariah, this king ". . . shall come to you . . . meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass." Military leaders don't ride donkeys; they ride horses. Israel's future messianic king will be unique. He'll not only refuse to ground his monarchy on military might, he'll actually disarm the entire country! No one has ever experienced such a king or such a nation. (If by now you're suspecting the four evangelists based their narratives of Jesus' "Palm Sunday" entrance into Jerusalem on Zechariah 9, you're not alone. Every Scripture scholar I know shares your suspicions.)

This image of an upside-down world is certainly carried over into the Christian Scriptures.

Paul, for instance, warns the Christian community in Rome not to go through life depending solely on what they can experience through the "flesh." For followers of the risen Jesus, there's a whole other world, a world which the Spirit creates every day of our lives. It's in this dying/rising world that we're expected to live. That's why the Apostle assures us, "If you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Only by giving ourselves over to Jesus' Spirit can we faithfully imitate Jesus' upside-down behavior.

Once we do that, Matthew's Jesus tells us we'll begin looking at the people around us through different eyes. No longer do we focus on the rich and powerful, neither do we zero in only on the "wise and learned." For followers of Jesus, the most important inhabitants of this planet are the "little ones:" those who daily go through life laboring and burdened. Imitating Jesus, our task is to provide "rest" for them, something people would logically put at the bottom of their "to do list," if it even appears on it at all. For other Christs, the world's top becomes the bottom, and the bottom, the top.

It's ironic (or providential), considering America's participation in World Wars I & II, if it weren't for those victorious thirteen colonies, Great Britain, as we know it, might not even exist today.

Perhaps the only way to definitively save this world is to turn it upside down. Our sacred authors and the historical Jesus might have been centuries ahead of themselves in expecting their readers and followers to be motivated by such a postposterous value system. But, if it works

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JULY 12TH, 2020: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:10-11 Romans 8:18-23 Matthew 13:1-23

We often forget that the oracles of individual prophets which have been collected into the books bearing their names weren't transcribed in the order in which the original prophets chronologically delivered them. The prophecies have been artificially – and carefully - arranged by the prophet's disciples who actually collected and “published” them, often years or generations after their mentor's death. By that time, events had frequently taken place which altered the way those followers both looked at and presented the prophet's words.

Even today we still engage in such “up-to-date” alterations. Perusing the classic movie channels, I can't help but notice when the actress Nancy Davis appears in pre-1952 movies, the credits almost always list her as “Nancy Reagan,” a name she didn't have until after her 1952 marriage to the future president. On the other hand, Jane Wyman – Ronald Reagan's first wife who wasn't fortunate to become the country's First Lady - is always listed as “Jane Wyman,” no matter in what movie she appears!

After his martyrdom, Deutero-Isaiah's followers not only saved his consoling statement about the power of Yahweh's word, they deliberately placed it at the chapter 55 end of their collection of his prophecies. Though the Babylonian Exile had ended around 530 BCE and they were finally permitted to return to the Promised Land, much of what their mentor had assured them would happen had still not seen the light of day. Those longed-for events continued to be buried in the words the prophet had proclaimed. Yet they, like he, were convinced once Yahweh's words had been spoken it was only a matter of time before they would take effect. “For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth . . . so shall my (Yahweh's) word be that goes forth from my mouth . . .” Eventually it will “achieve the end for which (Yahweh) sent it.”

Placing this oracle at the end of their collection makes it both a sign of their faith in Yahweh's word, and a reminder that God's disciples are committed to this faith thing for the long run. The years of water that passed unfulfilled under their life's bridge had convinced them of that latter reality. They couldn't have better summarized their experience of waiting.

Jesus' first followers had parallel experiences. In today's second reading, for instance, our earliest Christian biblical author, Paul, shares some of his insights about waiting “for the redemption of our bodies.” The Apostle is convinced it's not enough that we've personally been transformed by our dying and rising with Jesus, we want the whole world to undergo the same metamorphosis. It's no accident his letter to the Romans is one of his last writings. Paul's been waiting for a long time. No wonder he states his belief “. . . that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now.” It certainly hasn't been a peaceful wait.

Our gospel pericope provides us with a classic example of an “original” parable of Jesus (verses 1-9) which has later been “allegorized” by the early Christian community and applied to a situation the historical Jesus never encountered - people giving up the faith (verses 18-23). The historical Jesus seems to have originally told this story to those who accused him of wasting his time preaching God's kingdom. Though they point out almost no one will ever follow through on what he's teaching, he has no plans to stop. He's convinced the few who actually do carry out his words will produce “a hundred, or sixty or thirtyfold.”

The wait for God's word to be fulfilled is always worth it, no matter what's happening in our lives.

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