

The Big Reversal

Jonah 3:1-5; 10
Mark 1:14,15

A footnote in the Oxford Study Edition of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible tells us Mark 1:15 is, "Jesus' entire message summarized." The summary has three points: "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand;" "repent," and "believe in the gospel."

"The time is fulfilled" comes from a Greek phrase that more nearly means, "THE time has come for God's greatest work to start to happen". If Koine Greek had used exclamation points this sentence would have at least three at its end. It has much more force in the original than in English. Jesus, speaking to fellow Jews, has just told them THE greatest promise God ever made has just started to come true. The Messiah, whom the prophets called The One Who Is to Come, has come. And, Jesus implies, you're looking at him. But do not miss the two little words, "start to" before "happen". In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus *inaugurates* the kingdom of God. It has started to break into this world. But it has not come anywhere close to a full realization of its power or of a completion of its work.

We can draw a useful analogy to this week's presidential inauguration. Whether you voted for or against him, I think you will agree President Biden hit the ground running. He has *started*. But we as yet have absolutely no idea what the whole of the

President's term in office will bring. We can make educated guesses about what he may accomplish—and about what damage we believe he will do if we disagree with his policies. But we do not yet know, in the interesting phrasing of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, “the known unknowns”. Only time will tell what sort of record President Biden will compile.

In a similar fashion Jesus called his incarnation, his birth into this world, the birth of the kingdom of God as well. What it will become when fully realized we still do not know. Only time will tell, the time that passes before the next right time comes: the Day of the Lord, when Jesus returns.

And what is this “kingdom of God”? One part of its meaning emerges with a slight re-translation of what Jesus said. The more reliable newer versions of the Bible render it as the “reign of God”. This interpretation emphasizes Jesus' position as king, as royalty, as God on earth. But the kingdom of God is more than a time and place under Jesus' rule. It is also the time and place where God's will gets done in gradually more powerful ways. It is the time and place where God moves all the chess pieces to the inevitable conclusion ordained by God. To those who protest that no world infected with deadly viruses and brutal dictators can possibly belong to the kingdom of God, we must reply, please re-read the prophets. Re-read what Jesus himself had to say about the time remaining.

God's kingdom is here and yet still coming. As yet it holds sway in human

affairs only partially. Theologians stress this precisely because of the question so many struggle to answer: why does a loving God permit so much pain and suffering in this world? C.S. Lewis called this “The question that has caused more to fall away from Christ than all others combined.” The honest answer is we cannot comprehend God's will. We cannot explain it. This makes accepting the slow roll out of the kingdom of God a matter of faith. And that is where it belongs. This is no facile, convenient non-answer. It is the hard but accurate truth. Jesus himself did not escape it. He died on a cross. Yet he retained his faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, of God over sin. He believed God's will would be done.

Jesus follows his notification about the kingdom of God with a one-word imperative, “repent”. Which takes us back to the last word in the previous paragraph: sin. John Bright, a scholar who apparently had a fair amount of time on his hands, listed the Old Testament prophets in order of the frequency with which Jesus referred to them. We might guess the first three: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah. Surprisingly, Jesus cited Jonah fourth-most, more often than Ezekiel, Daniel and all the rest. Jonah has only four shortish chapters. It does not contain a single oracle, not one Word from the Lord. It is a narrative, a story about a prophet sent to the greatest city in the world at the time to tell its residents to stop sinning.

Nineveh in Jonah's day (four to five hundred years before Christ) was the largest city archaeology has verified to have existed at the time. That would be largest in both square miles and in population. It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, located just

across the Tigris River from the present-day city of Mosul, in Iraq. Its vast mounds, the only remaining surface indication it ever existed, are clearly visible in satellite maps. They dwarf Mosul, a city of three-quarters of a million people. The book Jonah tells us it took three days to walk across Nineveh. The man Jonah walked into it for a whole day before delivering his message: “In forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown.”

We know from earlier chapters that Jonah did not want the Assyrians to repent. He did not even want to go to Nineveh. The whole “belly of a fish” (*not* whale) story represents his attempt to escape God's call to preach to the Assyrians. Imagine walking into a foreign metropolis dominated by a religion different from your own—Tehran, say—and shouting at its inhabitants that your God demands they clean up their act. This very prospect faced Jonah. Our passage gives us the moment he did it. And, to Jonah's dismay, they listened. They fasted and donned sackcloth and ashes—two displays of repentance. We know this angered Jonah because the next chapter explicitly tells us so. A Jew, he came from the ashes of a nation the Assyrians had decimated. He wanted them to suffer the same fate.

We must guard against having the same attitude. For we are all sinners and we all must repent of our sins. If we want to belong to the people of God in the kingdom of God we must turn away from them and turn toward Jesus. We must make the big reversal. The verb repent in Greek originally referred to the turn oxen make at the end of a furrow they have plowed. We must avoid being as stubborn and stupid as oxen or we will never leave this field for the next. We must repent, confessing our sins and

renewing our commitment to follow Jesus where he leads us.

He leads us, among other places, to belief in the Gospel, the third and final point of his opening statement in Mark, chapter one. Douglas Hare, the late professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, made much of Jesus' call that we believe not in Himself, but in the Gospel. Many will already know, but in this teaching sermon we must define Gospel. The word comes from Old English; scholars have traced its use back to the 1100s, if not earlier. It literally means "good" "spell", but we must understand that "spell" in Old English had not yet become associated with witchcraft. Spell then meant a word or words that accompanied a remarkable event. When anything unusual and unexpected happened, people of the time tried to discover whether any words had been said that made the thing happen. Good spells happened before good phenomena; bad spells before bad.

The word Gospel came into use for the first four books of the New Testament sometime in the 13th century. (In the Greek in which they were written they were called evangelions, Koine Greek for "good news".) This was the word Mark actually used here. But as Professor Hare points out, by using "Gospel" translators make a key theological point: the Good News was about ***more than Jesus***. The Good News could never come true without Jesus, but it covers more territory than him alone. The Good News, Jesus would later state, is that the poor get fed, the blind see, the lame walk, and the promises of God come true. The Good News is that, through faith in the Savior, people can be forgiven their sins and attain eternal life.

It is those two last sentences that Jesus calls us to believe: The Good News is that the poor get fed, the blind see, the lame walk, and the promises of God come true. The Good News is that, through faith in the Savior, people can be forgiven their sins and attain eternal life. The Gospel of Mark, as always, gets right down to business by putting this call in its very first chapter. This is the core. This is the heart. This is the Gospel and Jesus tells us repent and believe it. And, oh yes, we had better get down to business too, because the kingdom of God is at hand.

In the aftermath of the violence at the U.S. Capitol building I noticed politicians—on both sides—calling for a return to the values on which our nation was built. I suspect they do not unanimously agree on the actual content of those values, but the universality of their statements was striking. As Christian we need not question our core values. They are to repent and believe the Gospel because the kingdom has already started to emerge in time and space. Yes, Christianity places far more wide-ranging calls upon us. We are the church, the means by which Jesus chooses to provide for the poor, the blind, the lame, the oppressed and all who suffer. Yet the core remains: repent and believe the Good News. From that core, and only from it, we can make the love of Christ real for those who do not know it.

No matter what happens, never forget the core. Perform the big reversal. Repent. Believe the Gospel. The kingdom of God is at hand.