

The Coming One

I doubt there's anyone here, or anywhere else for that matter, who would argue with the claim that this is far from a perfect world. It's all too painfully obvious that it's not. Even those among us who have pretty close to everything a person could hope for are still subject to the same "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" as all the rest of us, and particularly so with regard to the vicissitudes of health, whether their own or that of loved ones. So it's easy for anyone to imagine a better world, a world—for example—without disease, a world where everyone has a place to live and enough to eat, a world without war and conflicts of every sort. Who wouldn't welcome the idea, then, of one whose coming would bring about that better world? We'd all look forward to that, to the coming of the One who could make this a better world.

But of course, your idea of a better world is not necessarily going to be my idea of a better world. In fact, it almost certainly will not be the same. We might agree on a lot of things, but not on everything, and some of the things you'd want in your better world, I might not want at all in my better world. So while we all tend to be open to the *idea* of One whose coming would make this a better world, and very much look forward to that actually happening, we may not be all that happy with such a One who actually *does* come, or with the changes that One might bring about.

Which is why, of course, those who waited patiently for generation upon generation in ancient Israel with eager longing for the promised Messiah, the One who was coming to make this a better world, did not all welcome with open arms the One who actually came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, or the changes that he sought to bring about in pursuit of that better world. Oh, everyone longed for the promised Messiah, everyone was waiting expectantly for that coming Messiah, but everyone had their own idea of what that Messiah would be like, and it became painfully clear that for many Jesus was not their idea of a Messiah.

You see, it's easy to love the *idea* of One who is coming to make this a better world; it's another thing entirely to love the *reality* when it's not what we expected. Even John the Baptist, whose entire message was focused on the One who was coming, who himself baptized Jesus and proclaimed him to be that One, even John began to have doubts when he heard what Jesus was actually doing. He wasn't alone in those doubts, either. That's why Jesus drew enormous crowds wherever he went at the beginning of his ministry, but just a few years later died all by himself, deserted even by his closest disciples, whose idea of a better world apparently did not include a cross.

Later on, this became a problem for the early church as well. As the gospel was proclaimed in more and more parts of the world, it brought about changes which quite often challenged long-standing social customs and traditions, for example, the status of women in society. Just as with changes that occur in the church today, some welcomed these changes and were delighted to see them taking place, but others thought some of them were going a little too far. There were times when such concerns were clearly justified, when along with some very good ideas that were clearly faithful to the gospel, there were some pretty crazy ideas, too. Then, as always, the idea of change is one thing, the reality something else entirely. The church struggled from early on with knowing which changes were really and truly the fruit of the spirit, and which were just someone's wild idea. If someone claims to be in the Spirit speaking for God, how do you know that's so? How do you know whether they are or not?

Paul is struggling with this issue as early as his first letter to the Thessalonians, which is thought to be the oldest book in the New Testament, dating from very early in the church's history, among the first generation of believers. Even at that early date, the church is already struggling with how to decide whether something is legitimately of the Spirit or not. One answer to that dilemma was simply to declare that the Spirit was no longer speaking in the church at large, that when the Spirit was poured out on the apostles at Pentecost, that from then on the Spirit spoke through the Apostles and no one else. As you might expect, this tended to be a popular idea among the apostles themselves.

But not Paul. No, Paul wasn't willing to accept that. For Paul, the Spirit had continued to speak to the church through those men and women who were called to be prophets, not just the apostles. But Paul was also painfully aware that some who claimed to be prophets were clearly not. So how could you tell the difference? How do you know whether something is genuinely inspired, that is, "in the Spirit," or not? Paul's answer to that question is found in our epistle lesson this morning, and they are words that are just as relevant for the church today as for the early church. Because Paul was convinced that the Spirit was still speaking to the church, he doesn't want to do anything to quench the Spirit, or to reject out of hand the words of those who claim to be prophets, because they might very well be. But at the same time, not everyone who claims to be a prophet really is.

So what do you do? I find his answer to be one of the most remarkable things Paul ever said, and Paul said a lot of remarkable things. But this is extraordinary. Paul says "Test everything." In other words, try it. If it seems to be genuinely good, seems to be truly of the Spirit, then keep it. If not, if it just doesn't work out or bear fruits clearly of the spirit, then get rid of it. But don't quench the Spirit, or despise the words of the prophets, just because there are some who might lead you astray. Better to take the chance of listening to some crazy ideas from time to time, than simply closing off the possibility of the Spirit's speaking at all. If the church today were as open to that possibility as the apostle Paul, we'd be a whole lot better off.

Why isn't the church open to that possibility? Ironically, part of the problem is Christmas, or at least what Christmas has become for many of us. You see, this whole dynamic of loving the idea of the one who is coming, but tending to have doubts when it actually happens, takes a very special form for us in the church today in our celebration of Christmas. We all love Christmas, and in particular, we love the Christmas story as told by Luke. We love that story, and for good reason, because it's a great story. We love the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she's going to have a baby. We love the part about Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem and finding no room at the inn, so when Mary gives birth she puts the child in a manger. We love the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night who then come to visit him.

Everyone loves this story, because everyone loves baby Jesus. Of course, baby Jesus is very easy to love because he's never done or said anything to challenge us. In fact, I think a lot of us would prefer deep down inside that he stay that way, that he stay nice cuddly baby Jesus, so that we can project all our hopes and dreams on him, just like we do with our own infants. As long as baby Jesus remains our Messiah, then ours is a religion that is nothing but *our* hopes and dreams, and no reality at all, always something that is going to be, but never really is.

But the fact is baby Jesus grew up, and through his teachings and the course of his own life he held out to us a vision of a better world, a vision which continues to reverberate through both the church and the world even today, challenging us in ways that are not always comfortable, in ways that are not always what we expected or hoped for, in ways that may not always be *our* idea of a better world. His spirit is still speaking to us, still pushing us toward a better world, his idea of a better world, in ways that may sometimes surprise us, may even cause us to wonder whether it's truly the Spirit who's speaking or not. It's at such moments that the words of Paul are so important, "Do not quench the Spirit, or despise the words of the prophets. Test everything. Hold on to what is good, and get rid of the bad." Words every bit as true today, as the day he spoke them.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*