

December 5, 2021

St Paul writing to the congregation of Philippi in Greece told them this:

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.” (Phil 1:9)

*So that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.*

The Christians living in ancient Philippi had an advantage over us. When St Paul wrote to them about “the day of Christ,” they knew what he was talking about. I’m not sure we do. The day of Christ? What is that? Ask modern Christians, and I bet nine out of ten would be pretty vague what Paul meant by “the day of Christ.” It’s not our fault, I’m not blaming anyone for not knowing the right answer. It’s just that the congregation of Christians living in Philippi had heard Paul talking about “the day of Christ”-- quite a lot! Paul had spent months with them, in person, teaching them by day by day. He was always going on about the coming day of Christ. It was an intrinsic part of this teaching, as he confided another letter, the one to the Christians in Rome. By contrast, many modern preachers find the whole subject embarrassing. For one now former Episcopal priest I knew, it was all too much. Preaching in the season of Advent, during which the future return of Christ is the main theme, made him feel like a fraud, he told me. The very notion of some kind of glorious future encounter with Christ, here on this earth, had come to seem absurd to him. Having to talk about it during Advent made him so conflicted, that rather than face it again, he converted

to become a follower of a guru you may have heard of, named Baba Ram Dass.

If that is how clergy can feel, then no wonder folks in the pews might not be very well informed about what Paul meant when he spoke about the “day of Christ,” and prayed that his followers would be ready for it.

So let me just say, for my part, and on the record, that I have not given up on the idea of a glorious future encounter with Christ, here on this earth. This idea is just too deeply entrenched in Christian teaching to drop it entirely. I do get it that 2000 years have passed and no Second Coming has happened yet. I am somewhat puzzled why it is all taking so long. Fortunately however that is God’s business and not mine. But there is such a huge value in an approach to life that is centered on the future. Knowing there is a happy ending in store for the whole universe is a great motivator. The happy ending could come at any moment! This keeps us on our toes, for sure, but even better, it energizes us for good works here and now. God is at least as aware as we are of the shortcomings of the current order of things, and has a plan for making it all better. Hurray! God’s promise of radical change in the future keeps us from feeling locked in by destiny or chance or any other cosmic power here in the present. God can break through any of that, and will break through all of it, and this keeps hope alive, so that we can keep on keeping on day by day.

So in my preaching about Advent, I focus on the question, what does it do for my life here and now, to be oriented to a future that is absolutely certain

to be better? In a word, what does it do to my life—to all of our lives-- to live in hope?

In a word, the answer is, to live in hope keeps us from feeling locked in. On the cosmic level, we are free, because God has promised that the travails of this life are not the last word. A better day is coming, for us and for the cosmos. We just have to wait for it productively. Paul's recommendation how to live while we wait for it makes worlds of sense still: as I quoted earlier, Christian living is about "love overflowing more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best." Love that overflows with knowledge and insight to determine what is best! Wow! That's what I want to be found doing when the trumpet sounds at last! If it helps to keep on saying the Nicene Creed, including that Christ will come again with glory, then count me in.

So much for where I stand on the second coming of Christ in glory, which is our way of putting what Paul had in mind when he spoke about the day of Christ.

But where did Paul get this idea? Did he make it up himself?

Well, our other lessons make it quite clear that Paul did not make it up. There was John the Baptist, for instance, Jesus' great forerunner. To explain John's ministry, Luke's gospel was compelled to cite the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who foretold

*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness*

*"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

John the Baptist's ministry cannot be explained then, without reference to prophets who lived centuries earlier. And our first lesson, from another Old Testament prophet named Malachi, also is future oriented. Malachi speaks of a mysterious future messenger and says, "indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."

If you look into it, it is easy to find that the ancient people of Israel lived for centuries in the expectation that God would eventually do something to straighten out the mess they were in. Their term for this future event was, the Day of the Lord. They came by this expectation honestly. For century after century they put up with situations that they knew in their heart could not possibly be what God intended for them. They were ruled by one pagan empire after another, first Babylonians, then Persians, then Alexander the Great came through conquering away, and then the Romans took over everything, and none of this made sense. God loved the people of Israel too much to let this go on forever, so surely at some future date God would act to make it all OK. They looked for the restoration of a proper Jewish kingdom ruled by a descendant of David. The Day of the Lord even began to have cosmic implications. The whole order of nature would be turned upside down, they thought: the wolf would live with the lamb, and the lion would lay down with the kid, Isaiah said.

Such expectations developed over centuries. So when Paul talked about the coming day of Christ, he was working a very well-plowed field. Paul

himself had been raised with this very Jewish expectation of a coming Day in which God would act decisively to fix the whole world. Paul just referred it all to Jesus.

So there had been centuries of speculation about the future day of the Lord, by the time Jesus was born, and laid in a manger by Mary and Joseph.

I think it is safe to say, that the birth of this one baby, from the obscure village of Nazareth, was not how people expected the day of the Lord to begin. I'm not sure anyone saw it coming in just the way it happened. Even John the Baptist was puzzled how it unfolded. So as we come to Christmas in just a few weeks, it is worth pondering, how exactly was baby Jesus God's answer to the centuries of waiting for the coming Day of the Lord?

The glorious future Christ started out humbly in a manger, with barnyard animals wandering by. How was that in any sense an answer? Why did this, in God's mind, begin to fulfill the ancient prophecies?

But somehow, Christians believe, in God's mind, the birth of this one baby was the answer humanity had been waiting for. This baby would go on to break open the cosmic powers of sin and death, and inaugurate the new heavens and the new earth, so long foretold. It's mind-boggling, but then again, this is how it is when we deal with God: we get what we expect, but always in an unexpected way.

I don't want to get ahead of myself though. We can reopen the question about baby Jesus come Christmas Eve, which draws ever closer. For today, it is enough if we hear and take to heart what Paul prayed might happen for his friends in Philippi, while they waited for the Day of Christ. What Paul prayed for was that their love would overflow, in knowledge, and in insight, and that they would always see what is best. What a wonderful goal! It is still worth aspiring to today, as we, with Christians of all ages, wait in hope for the promise of an entirely new creation.