

Christ or Christendom?

"I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!

But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him."

Such is the story of Stephen.

He's the first Christian martyr.

And in his vision of what is truly real, in his invitation to his neighbors to glimpse that which is truly real, he's met with flying stones and ears intentionally plugged up!

It's our embrace of the world as we insist it must be — rather than accepting the free gift of the world as God knows it can be.

Don't blame the folks who are stoning Stephen this morning.

Isn't that how most of us react to this weird faith that Jesus calls us to?

Covering our ears so as not to hear — what?

Things!

Troubling things!

Things like:

“But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you!”

(Like Putin or Iran or Trump or Biden!)

“Lend without expectation of repayment.”

(Even to that sign holder on the corner, even to your no good brother-in-law!)

“Be merciful, as God is merciful!”

(Even to that crazy ex-girlfriend, boyfriend, husband or wife!)

“Give to everyone who asks!”

(Even if you gave something to her just yesterday!)

“Do to others as you would have them do to you!”

(As one friend sheepishly acknowledges, while it's not easy to ask for forgiveness, it's even harder to give it.)

We live in times when a great many are worried about declining church membership.

About the seemingly lost voice of the church in community life.

About big changes happening throughout our many cultures.

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat urges a great retreat among Christians.

“Go back to the monasteries of the Middle Ages!

Preserve the faith from the onslaught of modern culture and changing attitudes about power, gender, race and class,” he says.

But perhaps these fears are not so much about the decline of Christianity – but about the decline – of Christendom.

Because, Christianity is about selfless service.

Self-sacrificing love.

A refusal to judge one another.

A life lived in the amazing freedom of the Holy Spirit to move and act as she wishes.

Sometimes upending our cherished traditions.

Usually forcing us out of our comfortable places and into the dynamic and challenging places of love and reconciliation.

We follow a savior who is, in Thomas Merton’s words,

“A vagrant.

A destitute wanderer with dusty feet, who finds his way down a new road.

A homeless God.

Lost in the night.

Without papers.

Without identification.

Without even a number.

A frail expendable exile who lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world, entrusting Himself to sleep." T. Merton, Hagia Sophia.

Christianity not only reflects, but embodies the heart of this vulnerable God.

But Christendom is something else entirely.

Christendom is the unholy consequence of church and state sleeping in the same bed.

Christendom happens when the wildly radical demands of the gospel are brought to heel.

When a faith that can move mountains becomes mere religion.

When the uncompromising love for all is reduced to loving “us” — but not “them.”

When “God and country” becomes the rallying cry.

Where enemies are everywhere — and they are hated.

Christendom is obsessed with rules and order and hierarchy and power and money and the status quo.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, Christendom happens:

“when religious leaders conflate God’s will with an existing social order, even one blatantly unjust, virulently racist, and impulsively violent.” MLK, Letter From Birmingham Jail.

We have lived most of our lives, indeed, for many centuries, under the boot of Christendom.

And it is Christendom that’s dying today, thanks be to God!

So for the first time in a very long time, we are at long last free to ask yet again, what does it mean to be a Christian?

Peter tells us plainly who we are:

“You are a chosen race!

A royal priesthood!

A holy nation!

God's own people!

In order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light!

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

All of which tells us that we are resident aliens in this life!

We are the advance guard of the Kingdom of God!

And so, we seek "to transform all that is not consistent with God's will.

We come to understand that we no longer belong — heart, soul, mind and body — to tribe, class, gender or ideology.

We no longer build a fortress around family, clan, culture or language.

Because in Christ, we have a new identity!

Our old identity is now stripped away.

And so we offer not a pinch of incense to emperors.

Nor do we sing national anthems.

We bow only to the cross — we sing only the hymns of the citizens of the kingdom of God.” Commins, *If Only We Could See*, 46-7.

Modified.

The difference between Christianity and Christendom is revealed in a conversation between St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Innocent III.

The Pope is showing the Saint around the grand palaces, all aglitter with silver, gold and fine jewels, in what is now called the Vatican.

The pope says to Francis:

“It’s the same Church, but we can no longer say with the apostle Peter:

‘Gold and silver I have not.’

To which Francis replies, ‘Nor do you have the power to say, ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk!’”

The power of God — exchanged for the power of gold — is how Christendom pollutes and defiles Christianity.

That fact brings us to our gospel lesson this morning.

Jesus says, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going.'

Thomas says to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going.

How can we know the way?'

Jesus says to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'"

Christendom takes these words of Jesus and uses them as a weapon to threaten all those who aren't card carrying members of the Jesus club.

But Christianity knows that Jesus isn't creating a club.

Nor is he talking about heaven and the after life.

No, he's talking about how we can be in deep and intimate relationship with God today, in this life.

How we can experience today the life that really is life!

A way of life that's rooted in compassion and mercy and humble service.

A way of life rooted in a desire for peace.

A life committed to righting the many wrongs we commit against one another.

Individually yes, but also collectively, through unjust structures that create vast economic, social and racial chasms between people.

Jesus beckons us to follow a different path.

And everyone who embarks on this journey, no matter by what name she calls herself, is most assuredly on the path to God's kingdom.

On this path, we begin to sense the "slipperiness, the fluidity, between heaven and earth." Cummins, id. at 48.

And we begin to marvel at "an unspeakable secret:

Paradise is all around us — yet we don't understand." Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

And so my friends, "like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk.

Come to him, the living stone, though rejected by mortals – yet chosen and precious in God's sight.

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, and become – a holy priesthood!"

+amen