

B Advent 02

4 December 2011 St Michaels Studio City

2 Peter 3.15

Time and Mercy

“Don’t forget that the Lord is patient because he wants people to be saved.” (2 Peter 3.15)

In the early church there were two major crises. Isn’t it nice to know that our time is not the only era in which there are conflicts and misunderstandings in the church?

One of those crises was over the issue of the Christian believer’s relationship to the mother faith, Judaism, or, in broader terms, what makes a Christian. Since every one of the earliest followers of Christ was a Jew, it was just assumed that believers in the Jewish messiah who was sent by the Jewish God would have to be Jews themselves – that is, non-Jews would have to submit themselves to the Jewish Law in order to follow the Jewish Christ. That is what all the circumcision language is about in the New Testament; it is a short-hand way of referring to submission to the Jewish Law. Male circumcision was a sign of submission to the Law of Moses. There was, by the way, no corresponding female sign; women were simply assumed to follow along wherever the leading male of their household went.

But the Spirit of God active in the church began to lead those early followers in another direction. As each day passed and they reflected upon the meaning of the this man, Jesus, Christian leaders, particularly Peter and Paul, began to see something else, a new understanding come from God, though in different ways. Peter’s major experience is related in the tenth chapter of the book of Acts: he has a puzzling dream in which a divine voice declares all sorts of creatures regarded as unclean by the Jewish Law to be nothing of the sort. They, too, are as completely acceptable to God as ritually clean animals, birds, and bugs. Peter doesn’t know what to make of his dream until a group of Gentiles approaches him asking to join the community of believers. They respond to the message of Jesus and about Jesus. Peter and his companions see evidence in the Gentiles that God’s Spirit has come to them. Peter, in a flash, realizes what God has told him in the dream: non-Jews are acceptable in themselves, just as they are, if they trust in Jesus as the Messiah. Peter immediately baptizes the Gentiles, making them Christians, without requiring they accept Jewish Law, without requiring the symbolic circumcision – a great relief, I’m sure, to the male members of the household.

Another major Christian leader, Paul, who had been a zealous follower of the Law before his conversion to Christ, arrived at the same conclusion by another route. Paul wrestled with the death of Jesus, its shameful nature as a criminal execution, and the seemingly random triumph of evil over good, the murder of the Messiah after only two or three years of teaching and leading. What Paul arrived at was an understanding of the death of Jesus, not as a contradiction to the plan of God, but rather as fulfillment of God's purposes. Paul saw the openness of Jesus, the obedience of Jesus, the love of Jesus for God and for humanity, the willingness of Jesus to do whatever was necessary to bring things right for men and women – Paul saw this amazingly unselfish Man-who-was-more-than-Man as the real saving act. As people began to trust the God whose Messiah Jesus is, salvation came to them. Law, Jewish or moral or ethical, was not necessary to belong to God, only trust in God's active love as focused most forcefully in Jesus. So Paul accepted non-Jews into the Christian community without requiring that they accept the Jewish Law.

This was an enormous turning point in the church's understanding of God and God's expectations of human beings. It came about only after great soul searching, confusion, and pain in the early church. But it focused the community of believers upon God's act of love and mercy in the Messiah rather than on the fickle human endeavor to keep the rules.

The second crisis in the early Church was about the nature of time, though they didn't think of it in those terms. Jesus had promised to return to the world to bring the completion of God's merciful activity. From the moment that Jesus went away in that event we name the Ascension, Christians began expecting him to return – now! – tomorrow noon at the latest. Jesus' return would bring the end of human history, actually the end of the entire universe, because God would remake all that is into a whole new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, to use Biblical language, a new creation that would be in perfect union with God, doing God's will of love, beauty, and mercy. Because you and I are here now, living imperfect Christian lives in a world that is clearly not expressing love, beauty, and mercy, we know that that did not happen. That was the crisis. As the years lengthened, the doubts crept in. Was Jesus wrong? Are we mistaken? Did we misunderstand the message of the Messiah, the message about the Messiah? Many early believers despaired, gave way to their lack of imagination, and stopped trusting in the God who acted in Jesus of Nazareth.

That's when the Church began learning a new dimension of God's mercy. That's when we began to learn about time as the mercy of God. With time lengthening down through the centuries came the births and lives of billions of human beings, each one a beloved child of God, each one unique, each one beautiful with a loveliness no one else can express. Though some in our own day expect and pray for the end of the world and the second coming of Christ

in our day – tomorrow noon at the latest – I see that desire as profoundly selfish and unchristian. I desperately hope it is wrong. I want millions of more years of the history of humanity and the universe, to see what God working in time will bring into being, to see what God working in time will re-work (redeem), to see what God working in time will refine and polish and make incredibly beautiful and holy (salvation). If Jesus had returned to end the adventure when the early Church wanted it, you and I wouldn't be here. If Jesus returns now, our great grandchildren will never see the light of creation and salvation. So the early Church had to learn patience, had to learn to see the tardiness of Christ, not as absence and lack, but rather as another expression of the mercy that had called them into God's community. God needed time to create more souls to people the new heaven and the new earth She was bringing to be. He still needs time to make countless more souls and work with them in the great adventure of re-creation, of salvation, of completion, of mercy and love and beauty and holiness.

Or as the writer of our reading from Second Peter put it today: "Don't forget that the Lord is patient because he wants people to be saved." (2 Peter 3.15)