

Not like the brazen giant

Matthew 25:31-46

November 23, 2008

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips.*

American Christianity has done serious disservice to the cause of God's kingdom by fostering the idea that religious faith is an entirely personal, even private, matter. Faith, for most of us, is a matter of going to church ...

Going to church to demonstrate our thankfulness to God, for all of God's many blessings.

Going to church to recharge our spiritual batteries, to refocus for the week ahead, to get our personal lives back in order and back on track, to seek wisdom from God in making a difficult decision or in pointing our lives in a morally responsible direction.

Going to church to find comfort in hard times, in times of anxiety or stress or loss.

Going to church, coming back to church, when faced with death, my own impending death or the death of someone near and dear, coming back to church to find a reason for hope and a ground for courage and the strength to go on in expectation of a life beyond this life.

We see faith as a choice, a personal choice, a matter of how I choose to think and feel and act in order to bring into my life, to let God bring into my life, the support and guidance and comfort I need. My faith is something for me, about me, something between me and my God, just as your faith is something between you and your God. So I will not judge your faith and you should not judge mine. God is my judge!

Of course, faith is all these things, but it is more, too! Faith is personal, but not private! God is my judge, but God is judge too of all the nations!

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles ...

God judges people and nations.

The cause of God's kingdom is damaged by a privatized, over-personalized faith because it supposes God only cares about what individual people believe and do, not what groups of people, what nations, what governments, believe and do.

The cause of God's kingdom is damaged by a privatized, over-personalized faith because it supposes morality is about personal choice alone and not about social justice.

The cause of God's kingdom is damaged by a privatized, over-personalized faith because it supposes God's kingdom is about how things will be in the next world, not how things are in this one.

And the cause of God's kingdom is damaged by a privatized, over-personalized faith because it supposes faithful Christians have no reason and no need to be concerned about matters of public policy, no reason and no need as Christians to get involved, to speak up, to take a stand, to make judgments.

But God judges people and nations, because the attitudes and actions of both people and nations determine whether or not God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The Bible has a long record of the judgments made by the Lord on the nations of this world, declared through prophets and apostles!

Amos declares God's judgment of Syria:

The Lord says, "The people of Damascus have sinned again and again, and for this I will certainly punish them. They treated the people of Gilead with savage cruelty ...

Nahum declares God's judgment of Assyria:

*Doomed is the lying, murderous city,
full of wealth to be looted and plundered!
Nineveh the whore is being punished.
Attractive and full of deadly charms,
she enchanted nations and enslaved them.*

Isaiah declares God's judgment of Babylon:

*Babylon, come down from your throne,
and sit in the dust on the ground ...
no more will they call you the queen of nations!
I was angry with my people;
I treated them as no longer mine:
I put them in your power,
and you showed them no mercy;
even the aged you treated harshly.
You thought you would always be a queen.
and did not take these things to heart
or think how it would all end.*

And Amos declares God's judgment of Israel:

The Lord says, "The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and for this I will certainly punish them. They sell into slavery honest people who cannot pay their debts, the poor who cannot repay even the price of a pair of sandals. They trample down the weak and helpless and push the poor out of the way ...

Hosea too declares God's judgment of Israel, the nation that was supposed to be a holy nation, a distinctive people, a light to the other nations of the world:

*Israel has become like any other nation and is as useless as a broken pot.
Stubborn as wild donkeys, the people of Israel go their own way ...*

But it is not just the Old Testament prophets, it is New Testament apostles too who bear witness to God's judgment of people and nations.

In the book of Revelation, John declares God's judgment of Babylon:

*Great Babylon has fallen!
... her sins are piled as high as heaven,
and God remembers her wicked ways ...
Give her as much suffering and grief
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.*

But the Babylon John is talking about is not the ancient Mesopotamian city, but the city built on seven hills -- Rome!

And the gospel of Matthew declares:

*When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on
his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him ...*

The people of all the nations will be gathered before the Lord to be judged. All the people ... people of every race and every religion and every nationality. People of all the nations, not just gathered one-by-one-by-one to stand as individuals before the righteous judge, but gathered nation by nation standing together to hear what the Lord will say of them.

And what does the Lord say? By what standard are people and nations judged?

*I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger
and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and
you took care of me, in prison and you visited me ...*

People and nations will be judged on the basis of their treatment of those living on the edge and those living at the edges: people who are hungry, thirsty, sick, imprisoned, alien; the poor, the weak, the homeless, the lonely, the outcast. People and nations will be judged by the quality of their mercy -- not by the depth of their religious piety, not by size of their charitable contributions, not by their accomplishments in defense of liberty or opposition to tyranny, but by their mercy.

*The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;*

*It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show like God's
When mercy seasons justice.*

That's Shakespeare! And this is the Lord's prophet!

*The Lord says [to Israel], "I hate your religious festivals; I cannot stand them!
When you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; I
will not accept the animals you have fattened to bring me as offerings. Stop
your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps. Instead, let justice flow
like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never runs dry!"*

Justice means fairness, fairness shown to strong and weak, rich and poor, insider and outsider alike. And righteousness means love, love shown in particular and especially to the widow and to the orphan and to the stranger.

We will be judged, you and I and our beloved nation, by our mercy, by our fairness, by our love.

Not like the brazen giant!

Do you know this line? Do you know to what it refers?

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land ...*

Not like that giant metal monument fashioned in the form of the Greek sun god, said to straddle the entrance to the harbor on the island of Rhodes. Not like this Colossus, one of the wonders of the ancient world, an emblem of victory, a symbol of defiance, standing proud and haughty, protecting those behind its back from threatening invaders.

Not like the brazen giant, but a new colossus, a different kind of monument, this one fashioned in the form of a woman, a woman welcoming strangers to her gate, named the Mother of Exiles. This one disavowing pomp and pride, but instead issuing a stirring invitation:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

Now do you recognize her?

This is our nation's glory, this is our nation's honor, this is our nation's proper legacy: our mercy, our indiscriminating welcome, our readiness to embrace the homeless, the exile, the poor, the oppressed, the unwanted. And this is the basis on which we will be judged.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will ...

God judges in order to warn. God judges in order to save. God judges in order to root out everything that stands against the shalom God intends for all creation. We should heed the warning. We should embrace the salvation God offers. We should do our part to make shalom, to make peace, on this earth.

We should do our part as individual persons, showing kindness and mercy, offering food and drink and clothing and shelter, and ourselves. And we should do our part too as citizens of this nation, prodding our leaders -- who serve us! -- to show kindness and mercy, to offer welcome to strangers and exiles, and to make attention to the needs of the poor and weak and helpless among us the centerpiece of any public policy.

This is God's righteous will, and it is on this basis that both we and the nation who represents us will be judged!