

Have you ever heard that last verse in church before? “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” I have never heard that verse in church before. I am not even sure I ever *noticed* it before, although I have owned a paperback copy of Flannery O’Connor’s second novel for thirty-five years now. When I pulled the book off the shelf to check my memory, I found Matthew 11:12 right there in all caps on the second page (in the King James Version this time): “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away.” Leave it to Flannery O’Connor to find and preach the gospel that most church folk never hear.

I had to smuggle it in here, since the verse is not part of the assigned gospel reading for today (or any other day). There are reasons for that, but they aren’t very convincing. *The Greek is difficult. Matthew and Luke interpret the saying differently. Mark never mentions it at all.* It is one of those odd verses that scholars tend to view as almost certainly authentic since it is too obscure for anyone to have made up. If you ask me, we do not hear it in church because no one wants to believe that the kingdom of heaven is vulnerable to human violence. *Violent people can take heaven by force? Who wants to believe that?!*

But according to Matthew, these are Red Letter words. Jesus said them, and like many other hard things he said, they sound sorrowfully true. Some of us have been waiting so long for God’s kingdom to come that the odds of it happening in our lifetimes seem only slightly better than the odds of an asteroid hitting the earth. No more sorrow and sighing? Waters breaking forth in the wilderness? Everlasting joy for the ransomed of the Lord? Scripture says that it will happen. During Advent we say we’re waiting for it to happen. God’s world-mending, history-ending arrival in our midst is certainly *possible*, but how many of us deem it *probable* anymore?

Something has borne the kingdom away, and human violence seems as good an explanation as any. As much as we might like to believe that heaven is immune to our hostility—that the dreadful things we do to one another have no more power to harm God’s divine reality than wooden bows and arrows do to bring down the stars—still, these strange words of Jesus seem to say otherwise. What we do really matters, apparently. God’s rule is not something imposed on us but something offered to us, and if we insist on overthrowing it then we should not be surprised to find that we succeed.

The saying comes near the end of a dismal encounter between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist, who have come to ask him whether he is the Coming One or not. They never use the word “imposter” but the nuance is there. John is in prison. Herod has shut him up, in more ways than one. Roman squatters still rule the Holy Land, where Tiberius Caesar parades as Lord. Jesus has shown no sign of taking the situation in hand, of making good use of the popular support John has swung his way. Is Jesus who John thought he was or has there been a colossal mistake?

According to Matthew, these two started out on the exact same page. When John first appeared in the wilderness, his message was direct: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus responded to that message, joining John in the river Jordan. Then John was arrested, and Jesus picked up the theme. His first public proclamation was word for word what the Baptist had said: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

All these years later, we may be forgiven for thinking that everyone knows what that means, but apparently even John and Jesus did not agree on what the coming of the kingdom

meant. Did it mean God would lead Israel to triumph over her enemies at last, or did it mean the end of all enmity forever? Did it mean God would send Israel a new king for a new age or did it mean God was coming to relieve all human rulers of their thrones? Was the kingdom a *present* reality, in which the righteous already lived with God, or was it a *future* one for which all creation groaned? You can find support for any of these visions in the words of *some* prophet, although not in the *same* one—because contrary to what you may have heard elsewhere, God’s truth is not a smooth stone. It is a diamond, with many facets ground in it to let the light out.

Like John and Jesus, people of faith still don’t agree on what we mean by the kingdom of heaven, but most of us can agree that we mean *better than now*. We mean more peace than what each of us feels when we fall into bed exhausted each night. We mean more justice than we can read in the faces of soldiers and hostages whose awful eyes tell us the real news from Iraq. We mean deeper cause for celebration than a tax cut or bull market, and deeper healing than any of our colored pills can provide. We mean the transformation of life on earth as we know it, including us as we—alas!--know ourselves to be. We mean grounds for the hope that is in us, if not the arrival of the Very One who will make such hope obsolete. We mean Emmanuel—God with Us—making all creation new.

Is that close? If it is—if I got anywhere near your longing, if I even nicked the corner of what you are looking for from God, then perhaps you can feel the weight of it—what is sometimes called the weight of glory, but which is also weighed down by human expectation of what God should do when God comes—and not only *what*, but also *how*, for *whom*, and *to what end*.

You can hear Jesus sidestepping that expectation when John’s disciples come to see him. The question they ask him sounds simple enough--“Are you the Coming One, or are we to wait for another?”—but the question assumes that all present agree on what being the Coming One means. Jesus cannot answer “yes” or “no” without accepting the terms of the question, so he does not answer either way.

Instead, he tells his visitors to go tell John what they hear and see, in a sentence that would drive a creating writing teacher mad because it is all in passive voice. The lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them, but where is the actor in this sentence? Who is causing these things to happen? I read a lot of student papers, so I recognize this. *Matthew: Review chapter on active voice and rewrite this section by next class period.*

But Matthew cannot rewrite it, any more than Jesus can re-say it, because it is the prophet Isaiah they are both channeling. “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy” (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Of course depending on your expectations, that may or may not be enough. There were still plenty of blind people in Israel, after all, still plenty of lame people parked at busy intersections rattling tin cups at passers by. *All* of the lepers weren’t cleansed, any more than all of the dead were raised. The poor may have had good news brought to them, but they were still poor—still sharecropping for the rich, still paying taxes to the Romans, still wondering how to make ends meet without getting in worse debt than they already were. Herod was still minting coins with his picture on them and spending them on his grandiose building projects. Pilate was still robbing the Temple treasury to fix the plumbing in Jerusalem, while his soldiers broke the kneecaps of anyone who protested.

Couldn't the Coming One have gotten a better handle on all of that? Wouldn't it have been more striking if Jesus had said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the terror is over, the evil are defeated, the occupation is ended, and the oppressors are sent home"? Wouldn't the world have been a better place if Jesus had said, "the homeless are housed, the poor receive a living wage, the scales of justice are restored and the wealth spread evenly around"?

At least one of the gospel truths in this passage is that it's hard to be the Coming One without disappointing a lot of people, especially if those people have been waiting a long time. Until you show up, they can imagine you any way they want to. They can draw up your job description so that it is ready for you to refer to when you get down to work, and when that is done they can start falling in love with the world that you are going to set right for them at long, long last, just as soon as you appear. These people aren't dunces, either. They know their history and their scripture. They have a pretty good idea what is wrong with them and with the world too.

Then you appear, and some of them recognize you, and in short order the victory party begins, but before it has been going on any time at all some of them start noticing that you're not what they expected, exactly. You aren't exactly mopping the floor with the bad guys, who are still getting away with murder while you're back by the swinging doors to the kitchen talking with a couple of waiters and the busboy--not that there's anything wrong with them or with you for being back there with them—but frankly this does not look like a conversation that is going to turn the world around any time soon.

According to some students of the early church, people's expectations of Christ's second coming grew in proportion to their disappointment with his first. Even after his death and resurrection, all kinds of ancient hopes lay unfulfilled. Waters did not break forth in the wilderness. No lions lay down with any lambs. God's kingdom did not come, but Titus's troops did. In the fall of 70 *Anno Domini*, after a long and merciless siege, the Romans burned the Temple in Jerusalem to the ground and most of the city with it. *Are you the Coming One, or are we to wait for another?*

Jesus would not answer that question, or at least not directly. He told John's disciples to make up their own answer, based on what they heard and saw. He paraphrased a little of Isaiah, just in case they did not know what they were looking for—pointing out small things, not big things, happening among little people, not powerful people, with local effect, not cosmic effect, in a world where real change generally came in the wake of great armies on thundering horses.

Within a hundred years, the Coming One's followers would look for him to come again like that—not a restorer of sight this time, not a healer of busboys, or a raiser of the dead, but a conquering hero on a white horse, killing all the bad guys in the world with his sharp sword and throwing the worst of them into the lake of fire that never goes out (Revelation 20). They looked for a triumphant ruler whose complete victory over evil would leave no doubt in anyone's mind that he was King of Kings and Lord of Lords. His earlier humility would turn out to have been a kind of disguise, his apparent weakness a temporary condition that vanished when he came again in power and great might. When that happened, no one would have to ask him if he was the Coming One ever again. Bowed down before him, the whole world would *know* who he was.

During Advent, this expectation turns up not only in our hymns and prayers but also, I think, in our human hearts, which are so weary of the world's violence that we are willing for Christ, at least, to do whatever it takes to bring it to an end. Many of us have been taught to speak of his ultimate triumph as *delayed*, but based on his Red Letter words today, I am ready to

call it *mistaken* instead. Whatever the coming of the kingdom means, it cannot mean that the healing, reconciling, non-combative Christ we know was an imposter, just biding his time until he could beat down his enemies under his feet. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence. If we seek the kingdom by violence, then the violent will bear it away.

I don't know why we would be disappointed to discover that Christ comes again as he came the first time—working through small things, not big things, among little people, not powerful people, with local effect, not cosmic effect—except that we find great armies on thundering horses a more adequate display of power. I don't know why we would be disappointed to discover that the kingdom of heaven operates under the sign of the cross just as the Coming One did, except that we have always been disappointed by God's reluctance to give us the kind of world, the kind of life, the kind of savior we want.

“And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” he said, knowing better than anyone the disappointing, redemptive ways in which God works--sending a human child into the world instead of a mighty king, sending servants instead of troops--sending people like you and me instead of *real* disciples to do the work of the Coming One until he comes, for in just this way the kingdom of heaven draws very, very near.

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December 12, 2004