
The World as It Is

Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.” (John 7:6-7)

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor. He called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! . . . For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.” Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins.” (Rev 18:1-4)

The world, as it is, is the enemy of God. The world, as it is, is the enemy of the people of God. The world, as it is, is the enemy of those who, while claiming no belief in God, are devoted to creating a just society and act with such courageous conscience that they put the institutional church to shame. A great tension exists between the world as it is and those believers and nonbelievers who are “in the world but not of the world.” It is so because the world, as it is, is driven by abusive power, consuming greed, relentless violence, and narcissistic pride. The world as it is employs nationalism, propaganda,

racism, civil religion, and class enmity to bolster entrenched systems, corporations, and institutions. All of these are offensive to God and to those who seek to do what is just.

Many Americans find it difficult to imagine being devoted to their country and judging its faults at the same time.

Throughout the centuries, those who have faithfully witnessed to Jesus have learned all too well why the Greek word used for “witness” in the New Testament transliterates as “martyr.” But certainly it is not only obedient Christians who have found that the world is their enemy. People of conscience in every society have suffered the affliction of being enemies of the state, held suspect, imprisoned, brutalized, exiled, executed. The Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh speaks a word that all people of conscience understand: “We are the loving adversaries of every regime.”

Most Christians in the United States are lulled into imagining that here it is different. In this nation, do we not see the defender of religious freedom, of freedom of speech, of democracy? In this nation, do we not see the hope of the world, the defender of truth, the strongest society in history? In this nation, do we not see a friend of God? Surely here Christians may make peace with the world.

Perhaps those who feel at home in the United States are victims of the despotic democracy predicted by the French political scientist, Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831. He foresaw

an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest; his children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is close to them, but he does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone.¹

Those Christians who feel at home in the United States can do so only because they have buffered themselves from the brutal conditions of poverty, blinded themselves to the realities of racism, and deluded themselves into imagining that the vast military force of this country is the agent of justice. Many such Christians worship the idol of prosperity and have quieted their conscience in return for lives of relative ease and material comfort.

I had a nightmare recently in which I dreamed I was living in a house that was not my house. In the kitchen of this house, I sat in conversation with my wife and a friend who directs the Lutheran Coalition of ministries in Milwaukee. My friend asked me if I weep like one of the other urban pastors weeps. I said, "No. I no longer cry." He became very agitated at my response. I went down into the basement to call an insurance adjuster about a man that had been recently murdered by a fourteen-year-old boy. While on the phone, I heard the squeal of tires. Looking out the basement window, I saw that two cars had turned to block off the street in front of the house. Between the cars was a member of my congregation who had been a Vice Lord. Gang bangers got out of the cars, weapons drawn, and started to chase him into the house. Fearing that my wife would be caught in a cross fire, I screamed out a warning.

When I awoke in the middle of the night, I tried to sort out this dream. On one level it seemed a signal that I was shutting down emotionally to the horrors around me in my daily ministry. It also obviously touched on my fears and insecurity. Perhaps the nightmare is also something about my resistance to facing the world as it is. To live in a house that is not my house is my attempt to live where I do not belong. It is my attempt to create an individualized, safe, secure life for myself and my family removed from the violence that afflicts the urban poor. To no longer be able to cry about the daily horrors I encounter is a sign of spiritual death. It is a psychic numbing, an emotional distancing, an unconscionable removal from the lives of those who suffer. It is the encroachment of America on my soul.

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America Volume II* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 318.

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In the middle of a First Communion Class, a ten-year-old boy from the neighborhood said to me, “Hell is living in the ghetto with all its violence. Heaven is living in a safe neighborhood.” Even though such a statement disregards both the heavenly qualities of many who live in the ghetto and the hellish aspects of life for many who live in safe neighborhoods, it nonetheless offers a clear truth. In this country, a line divides those who are trapped in urban ghettos from those who have the economic luxury to live in relative ease. And the perception of life in the United States has a great deal to do with which side of the dividing line one lives on.

Do we think of hell first as something “out there,” far from our everyday lives? What does that tell us about our privilege?

How does one describe life on the ghettoized side of the dividing line? I think of the nine-year-old boy I visited, whose family was living on the third floor of an abandoned apartment building in a room without plumbing, heat, or electricity. His arm was broken and in a cast, but he would still go into the basement each morning, fill a bucket with water from a leaking pipe, and carry it up three flights of stairs to his family.

I think of Billy, who is single and usually unemployed or working menial, temporary jobs. His income is too little and unpredictable to rent his own apartment, so he stays with some acquaintances who smoke crack cocaine whenever they can. One day when I dropped him off at his place, he got out of the car carrying a bag of emergency food, motioned toward his apartment, and said, “Welcome to my little corner of hell.”

I think of Teresa, whose only income is a meager disability check she gets for her eight-year-old boy. His emotional outbursts are frequent, unpredictable, and so severe that she is summoned to his school at least three times a week and thus can’t hold down even a part-time job.

Unable to afford her own apartment, she doubled up with a family and then had to fend off unwelcome advances from the man of the house. One day, having no money for diapers and hearing that the downtown WIC office was offering them for free, she walked thirty blocks with her two-year-old and three-year-old daughters, only to be turned away empty-handed.

I think of visiting Gary in the county jail, where he was awaiting trial on felony charges. Not having seen him in months, I was taken aback by how haggard he looked and by how much weight he had lost. Weeping, he spoke of being homeless and addicted. Too afraid of being preyed upon if he fell asleep, he would wander the streets at night, high on cocaine. In jail he was doing what he could to avoid the gang bangers. He was finding some solace in one prisoner who, while dying of AIDS, was willing to listen to Gary and offer emotional support. “It’s hard in here,” Gary said. “But it’s better than being on the streets.”

How many of us—and how many of us *pastors*—know the stories of many people other than our social peers? How does that compare with Jesus’s practice?

I think of a recent visit to Deborah. We sat in her living room. I asked how things were going. “Not well,” she said. Her daughter, who is a prostitute and drug addict, was pregnant once again. (I have already baptized five cocaine babies birthed by her daughter.) The city building inspector had cited her house for thirty code violations and was threatening to begin fines. She was without any money to make repairs. (I had cautioned Deborah against buying this house. Her income was so limited and her credit so poor that the only home loan she could obtain was from a loan shark mortgage company at 16 percent interest. Her monthly payments were so high that she had no money for the required repairs.) Deborah told me that two days prior

to my visit, she had observed her forty-fourth birthday. That day she went with her teenage son to see his parole officer. She watched as her son was suddenly handcuffed and taken into custody for parole violation. Out on parole for a few months after serving two years, he had been gang-banging again and not attending high school.

Seeing her son taken away was so upsetting to Deborah that she suffered a mild stroke and was taken to the hospital. (She has been suffering for years from diabetes and dangerously high blood pressure.) She has an ongoing concern that the grandchildren she is raising will be taken away by social workers and placed in separate foster homes. Raising these children with all the complications particular to cocaine babies is more taxing than one can possibly imagine. Deborah's health is broken. She has not had a vacation in ten years. She lacks sufficient income to pay her bills. Her family is in disarray. Her only lifeline is her faith in Jesus and the concern of the church.

For Christians who do not live in poverty, the challenge is to view the world as it is from the underside, from the bottom, from the vantage point of the poor. Otherwise, at home in their society, they face the accusation of Jesus: "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me." How indeed can the world hate the Christian who is at peace with the world? In fact, the world values such a Christian. He or she is useful to the status quo. Such a Christian, attentive to the propaganda of the state, has closed his or her ears to the voice from heaven regarding Babylon: "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins" (Rev 18:4).

Viewing life from "the underside" also requires recognizing the "underside" of our own lives, the "shadow" of our own self-image.

How does one come out of Babylon? In the first instance, this command suggests a perpetual state of internal exile. The status of the faithful Christian is always one of being an alien in a strange land, always feeling unease with the disease of the culture. To come out of Babylon is to live in a constant state of resistance to classism, racism, and militarism. To come out of Babylon is to connect with a community of faith and faithfulness. To come out of Babylon is to act in accordance with one's conscience.

The world as it is will not be essentially changed until the eschaton, the end times. The fall of Babylon announced by the angel in Revelation 18 is an eschatological pronouncement. To come out of Babylon is not to make Babylon fall. The power to make Babylon finally fall is beyond human capacity. Whenever an empire falls within history, Babylon emerges resilient within the new regime. Such is the tenacity of Babylon in its hold on the world. As Daniel Berrigan points out, "To biblical faith there remain only small gestures of mitigation, of resistance, of unmasking, of holding accountable."² For the person who resists Babylon, the danger is that the good that can be done is too modest to be esteemed. The temptation is always a devotion to the consequential and the useful, the sweeping change and the grand scale action. Despite all best efforts, Babylon endures. The world as it is remains the enemy of God.

The world as it is operates out of domineering power, crass self-interest, and quid pro quo. Mayors, corporate executives, and union leaders may indeed be people of faith who in their personal relationships and private lives seek to live according to the ethical teachings of Jesus. Personally they may be quite charitable, forgiving, and exemplary in their love. But in their public life they are constrained to adopt a different ethic. Decisions are made with different criteria. What will expand my power and the power of my government? What serves my self-interest and the self-interest of my corporation? What is the quid pro quo at work in cutting this or that deal?

2. Daniel Berrigan, *Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 34.

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The world as it is has no interest in heeding the prophetic warnings of the faithful community. Moral suasion alone does not move government or corporate America. If moral suasion is backed by a substantial number of voters or shareholders and captures the attention of the media, then power and self-interest are engaged. But apart from such dynamics of public pressure, moral suasion represents little more than an annoyance to the powers that be. The world as it is ignores the prophets of God or disposes of them as it sees fit.

The world as it is co-opts religion for its own purposes. Before President Bush announced his decision to declare war on Iraq, Billy Graham was invited to stay overnight at the White House. Are we to believe that the President was engaged in a soul-searching night of discerning prayer? At work here was the classic use of the court prophet, *Gott mit uns*, the public appearance of moral authority and divine blessing. In essence, it was no different from Islamic clerics offering their assent to Saddam Hussein's claim that his action was a jihad, a holy war.

How has the world coopted my pulpit? My congregation? My parish? What will I do about it?

When the Monica Lewinsky affair became public in 1998, the Rev. Jesse Jackson was summoned to the White House as pastoral counselor for the Clintons. All well and good. But the political orchestration seemed transparent when Reverend Jackson then addressed the media concerning the performance of his pastoral duties. No Nathan the prophet here, boldly confronting the sexual misconduct of the nation's ruler (2 Sam 12:1-15).

I declined an invitation by my well-intentioned congressman to be his guest at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. He is an effective, decent legislator. But what is the point of gathering clergy

from around the country to dine and pray with Congress? When Congress serves the interests of the rich and of corporate America and wages war on the poor at home and abroad, do not clergy offer tacit approval and moral blessing when they attend the National Prayer Breakfast?

When I served as a parish pastor in Jersey City, New Jersey, I learned that forty-five of the inner-city clergy were on the city payroll. When the mayoral election drew near, his honor called in the chips. The bought-off clergy dutifully gathered for a group photo shoot at City Hall. These photographs were circulated throughout the inner city. Low-income voters, seeing their photogenic pastors standing beside the beaming mayor, were either ashamed of their pastors or seduced into voting for a man whose official decisions were worsening their conditions.

We need to see ourselves not just as people redeemed by God but as people being compromised, subjected to the numbing and spiritually deadening effects of the world's systems.

The world as it is, the enemy of God and under the judgment of God, is nevertheless loved by God. God seeks the salvation of the world. The mystery of forgiveness is at work in Revelation 21:24, where the seer envisions the kings of the earth bringing the glory of the nations into the heavenly Jerusalem. This promise follows the blood bath of Armageddon (Rev 19:11–21), where the kings of the earth are slain in battle by the rider on a white horse whose name is “The Word of God.” We are surprised, then, to see these defiant, slain kings reappearing in Revelation 21, bringing their glory into the holy city. The kings are not only forgiven, their glory is received and honored. All that has defied God in history is redeemed.

The world as it is has a glory to it that is worthy of being in heaven

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and worthy of the incarnate presence of God on earth. Human achievements in art, science, architecture, law, government, religion, music, and education are indeed glorious. Purged of hubris, oppression, and defiance, human culture, part and parcel of the world as it is, adorns the holy city. The world, as it is, is loved by God and eschatologically redeemed.