

Mark 10:17-21
Hebrews 4:12-16

The Throne of Grace

Driving around the western part of our country, I was struck by how vast and unpopulated it all is. Let me regale you, or bore you, with some statistics.

The state of Wyoming, for instance, has about 97,000 square miles of territory, and about 600,000 people, which computes into a population density of about 6 people per square mile. Most of the people live in towns like Cheyenne, Laramie, or Casper. One can drive for 100 miles and not see a person.

By comparison, Ohio has about 45,000 square miles and 11.5 million people, for a density of about 255 people per square mile. Great Britain has a population density of 762. I mention it only because it felt strange to go so many miles without seeing a town, or a farmer on a tractor, or even a telephone pole.

When I got back into eastern Nebraska it felt like civilization again because even though it was rural there was always a train or a silo or a barn in sight. In Wyoming there was just a few cows. It occurred to me that America has a long way to go before it is filled up.

And yet this nearly empty barren land was the scene of some of the most tragic events in American history. I went to see the Little Bighorn Battlefield sight.

Readings

The Old Testament reading for the day comes from the Book of Amos and it is a hard one, it is hard because it places heavy responsibility on people for what people have done.

“Seek the Lord and live,” it starts out in chapter 5 verse 6, that is the part we like. But then it goes on, “or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire; and it will devour them, and Bethel will have no one to quench it. . . . There are those who turn justice into bitterness, and cast righteousness to the ground.”

What a call to holiness, righteousness, and justice! One is struck by the knowledge that these words were directed against the Northern Kingdom of Israel - the tribes of Joseph - which was conquered by the Assyrians and completely destroyed.

Gospel

The Gospel reading comes from the Gospel of Mark chapter 10 and is the story of the wealthy young man. You know the story, this young man wanted not only to be good, but good enough to be saved, and the demand placed upon him was that he sell all his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and then go follow Jesus. And he couldn't do it because he had much to sell and was very attached to it all.

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God,” Jesus said, . . . “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.”

The followers of Jesus understood this saying better than we do because we do not generally consider ourselves to be rich and thus do not see our salvation as an impossibility.

But the disciples knew that if it was impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom, then it is impossible for anyone. The more time goes by, the more it seems impossible for us too. We need some help. We should just concede the point.

The Epistle

The reading from the Epistle addresses this problem; the problem of the impossibility of salvation.

“For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

It is our personal sins that God sees: selfishness, arrogance, pride, anger, malice, and hatred; a

tendency to dishonesty when it suits our purposes, a neglect of the well-being of our neighbor.

It is also our group sins: racism, which included slavery, the perpetuation of poverty, greed, excess, fear that makes enemies out of those who might otherwise be friends.

Many things in our culture have been divided between liberal and conservative and the idea is to see the other side as sinister and one’s own side as righteous and good.

Sometimes those who focus on the personal side of salvation like to call themselves conservatives while those who are concerned about social justice take the name liberal. One must understand that before God no such division can be justified and it cannot be justified biblically either.

Whichever side one is on is not relevant. Both sides must learn that the other is not an enemy, that each has some success and each has some failure. I am not saying that if you have concluded that one is better than the other you should change your mind, I am only encouraging humility and kindness towards those with whom you disagree.

Now it is not necessary to frame the interpretation of our texts in terms of the contemporary situation. There are other ways to frame it. The message is the same:

Whatever the list of sins may have happened to be, it turns out that we may as well be camels trying to fit through the eyes of needles when it comes to God's Kingdom. We just don't know how, or can't, get in. We need some help.

God sees everything
God sees us as we are
God's Word, we are told here, penetrates the dividing of soul and spirit, it judges the attitudes of the heart
Nothing is hidden
Everything is laid bare

At this point there is not much hope. But this point is not the end, not for the "10 tribes of Joseph," or for the rich young man or for the Lakota Sioux or the cavalry they fought against, for you or for me. What the text tells us is that we have a priest making the case on our behalf.

High Priest

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, let us hold fast to the faith we profess.

For we don't have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

We are hopeless in ourselves but hopeful in God. The Bible presents two cases; one in which we have no standing, and the other in which we have been granted access to the Throne of Grace. It tells us that the latter is the case.

Prayers

I have been struck by some of the missionary prayers we have been reading and praying these last two weeks;

"Father, create in us a heart like yours. Help us to be bold and compassionate with the good news of Jesus. Be the loving Father to those who don't know a father's love (and I guess we could also pray, "be the loving mother to those who don't know a mother's love). Restore wholeness to those who are broken and feel unloved."

Break our hearts with care for those who suffer, and work through our hands and feet and hearts to bring the love of Christ to those who cross our paths daily."

Our prayers matter because of God's grace. All the tragedies of human life are diminished because of this grace. Even our own sadness, our own fear, is chased

away because Jesus our priest knows our pain and our temptations.

Let us be encouraged as we approach the throne of grace with boldness, and let us pray these prayers and other prayers too, with the full confidence that we may receive mercy and find help.

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