

The Coming Great Returning (Part Two)

“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

Reflection 2 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Let’s go back again to our question, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” It follows one parable and leads into another, in Luke 18:9-14.

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness, and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

And so, yes, when the Son of Man comes, he will find faith on earth but perhaps in people we least expected it in, perhaps in this tax collector, hated, despised, reviled, a collaborationist with the Roman occupiers.

We have then this hunger today coming, I believe, from hearts and minds made in the image of God. Many, many people today seek authenticity. They seek a sense of wonder and awe. They seek to encounter the presence of God. They seek community but not community that’s focused primarily on itself – rather community that addresses global concerns, community concerned with human flourishing everywhere, community that cares for the oppressed, the marginalized and the poor, community that embodies God’s love in practical, meaningful, inclusive, healing ways. And these things they should seek. They have every right to seek these things.

They seek enlarged understandings of salvation. They are more drawn to the promise of Paradise than driven by the threat of Hell. They seek a Grand Narrative, the real story of which their lives are a part. They seek a strong sense of God’s love, a dynamic, never-failing love that draws them into intimate relationship with God, with their neighbors and with their own deepest selves. They seek in their faith a palpable sense of joy. And in all this, they seek less dogmatism and greater diversity. They understand Scriptures in their original contexts and they find in Scriptures multiple perspectives and always the possibility that there are more ways to interpret a text than just one.

In truth, what they seek – surprisingly enough – are ancient, timeless understandings of the human quest for the divine. So, yes, the church today faces a great turning point, but in many ways it may turn out to be a coming great returning as people seek ancient understandings of spiritual truth, forgotten paths of wonder and awe, maybe even the way and the truth and the life Jesus once taught but now uncovered and liberated from centuries of church dogma and tradition. People long for a place they once knew. In a sense, they seek not “the old-time

religion” but the oldest-time religion, those spiritual truths that we have always in our hearts known to be true. And in all this they are right.

In fact, knowing what we now know and believing what we now believe, there is every reason to be joyfully optimistic. It is likely that today we stand on the threshold of a great global spiritual awakening, a religious turning point that comes, say, every 500 years, the likes of which has not been seen since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, a great spiritual shift, a cultural transformation when people will learn to respect one another in their differences and learn to learn from one another, and discover that this too was part of what Jesus was trying to get us to understand.

And far from things falling apart, things may well be coming together. Some things, in fact, need to fall apart, and in their falling apart space is made for what is new and better. So it has always been when the church comes to its great turning points. All such times are at first unsettling, but they also offer great hope. They challenge what isn't working in the church and its message and mission. They point to new insight and direction. And in the end, historically this is what always happens: faith catches fire again and dynamically spreads. This time truly globally: A New World in the Morning.

So, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? My answer is a resounding Yes. But it may take forms that surprise us. And it may be found in people we did not expect. I think it will be found in the Millennials and in those who come after them.

But it will also call for a coming great returning. So to this we aspire: to imitate Jesus and his followers, to encounter the same God they did, and to enact God's love in our world by feeding the hungry, comforting those who mourn, standing up for the oppressed, caring for the poor, healing the sick and doing the hard work that makes for peace. And when our children and our friends wonder why we do these things, we let them know we do it for the joy. We do it for the beauty of it all.

May we lift our eyes across the earth and into the future. May we understand the times in which we live. And as those people come to us who have weighed religion in the scales and found it wanting, who seek compassion, decency, common sense and inclusiveness but who cannot find it in churches, mosques and synagogues, who seek to make sense of a God they still believe in but whom they struggle to find in religion, may they find all this and so much more in us.

– Dale Pauls