

Vision (Part One)

“For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord”

Reflection 63 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

We end our series of reflections on “A New World in the Morning” by making the point that this new world begins in our imagination. It’s first a matter of vision, of our daring to believe in it. Earlier in this series we noted that so much in life comes down to what we’re focused on – that in a very real way we always get what we ask for. Jesus said that over and over again. As usual, he’s right. We always get what we ask for. The problem is that we never know until we get it what it was we were actually asking for.

Now we expand on this a bit and stress the power of vision: not only in the best of times but even in dark times, to still believe, to trust, to see the world as it could be, to see God’s world as it could be. Consider this text from the great Hebrew prophet Isaiah, one of the most magnificent texts ever written, Isaiah 11:1-9. Things were not good in Isaiah’s time, the late eighth century BC. A wicked king Ahaz was on the throne. It was one of the worst periods of apostasy in Judah’s history. The pagan high places flourished. Ahaz is even charged with offering his own son as a burnt offering (2 Kings 16:3). Paranoia ran wild; people saw conspiracies everywhere. But what was really terrifying was that the murderous armies of Assyria (from present-day northern Iraq) were on the march, devastating the countryside, massacring innocent people, making pyramids of human skulls, and celebrating their policy of state terrorism. The people of Jerusalem witnessed in those years, just a very few miles to the north, the fall of their sister kingdom Israel to the Assyrians, and the deportation of its leading citizens into lands far away. And soon the lethal, deadly Assyrian war machine would show up before their own city gates.

And it was in this context, with these kinds of things going on, that Isaiah writes this text. In these dark and troubling times he envisions the coming of a ruler on whom the Spirit of the Lord will rest, the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, a ruler who will not judge just by what he sees with his eyes or hears with his ears, but with rightness will judge the needy, with justice will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The result will be that the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra. The reader wants to reach out and jerk the baby from harm’s way, but the young child will put his hand into the viper’s nest without harm. They will neither harm nor destroy on all God’s holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

So a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; that is, a king will emerge from the line of David. With the death-dealing army of the Assyrians just miles away, with their weapons of mass destruction, having already laid waste the sister kingdom of Israel, Isaiah, giving voice to the hopes and dreams of the people, looks to a leader with a spirit of wisdom and understanding, with intellectual power; a spirit of counsel and power, practical know-how and the moral energy to carry out his decisions, and a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, a spiritual connection to God. He looked to a leader who could see through first impressions and uncover the truth behind the appearances; who would rule with absolute fairness, giving decisions for the poor of the earth. This is what we all long for. For such leaders we always seek.

Of course on the deepest level, we find this pre-eminently in one person, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the shoot that comes up from the stump of Jesse. It is on him that the Spirit of the Lord fully rests. It is he who judges not by what he sees or hears, but with rightness, with absolute justice in all circumstances. It is he who has always given decisions for the poor of the earth; it is in his hands that the weakest will be safe. And it is only through him that the earth can and will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. And of course it's not all sweetness and light. He forcefully restrains the unloving, the wicked—striking the earth with the rod of his mouth, he slays the wicked with the breath of his lips.

The result is (in verses 6-9) a golden age: the wolf living with the lamb; the calf and the lion and the yearling together, with a little child leading them; the lion eating straw; and an infant playing harmlessly around cobras and vipers. Elsewhere the prophet Isaiah pictures (in 2:4) nations beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nations not taking up sword against nation, not even training for war anymore; and (in 9:6-7) a child being born, a Prince of Peace, of the increase of whose peace there will be no end.

And now in chapter 11, Isaiah pictures a return to Eden before the Fall. Even humans and snakes get along! The wolf lives with the lamb, the leopard lies down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child leads them. He pictures a complete reversal of things, a new creation. Those who were once the most helpless and vulnerable will be at ease with those who were once the most brutal and violent. As Paul says in Romans 8:18-23, creation itself is liberated. And even a child can lead, a child, not a strutting world leader. The earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord, filled with God-consciousness. A world grown old in sophistication, cynicism and violence will find its salvation in innocence, simplicity and trust.

What I want us to see is that the poetry here matters. Such visions matter. Such dreams matter. In fact, the notion of a new world in the morning is woven of this very vision, and where people believe it and hold on to it, this dream slowly but very surely becomes reality.

– Dale Pauls

Part two (of two) next week