

God's Patience and Faithfulness

Anyone who has taken up the sport of Golf will know some of the basic rules; these rules contained in the rule book, the bible of golf contains 34 basic rules, each rule having several sub sections. Playing golf requires integrity, for if you strike your ball and it lands just where you do not want it to land, say behind a fallen branch just off the fairway, or a few feet out of bounds in the rough, the temptation for the Saturday afternoon hacker to move the ball to a better position is irresistible. I confess being guilty, failing to access a one stroke penalty on more than one occasion. In the eyes of the gods at the R & A in St. Andrew's the holy of holies of golf, condemnation for ignoring the rules. At the professional or competitive level this latter sinfulness incurs disqualification.

For the Saturday afternoon hacker such as me, questioning looks from their playing partner.

We read in Exodus, three months since the Israelites escape from Egypt they are camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses is summoned by God to ascend the mountain where God gives to Moses the conditions of the covenant he is about to offer the Israelites.

The escape from Egypt had been successful; they had with God's help outwitted and escaped the wrath of Pharaoh's pursuing army. God had carried them out of Egypt as with on "Eagles wings"

The time had come for the Israelites to turn to God in faith, love gratitude and obedience for their deliverance.

The Israelites now had to make a decision; a choice offered to them by God to be his chosen people, to become a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

The original covenant God made with Abraham approximately 800 years previous was being renewed. Israel was being ordained to be

God's messenger, to be the example of a priestly nation to the world.

Psalm 96: 3 "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples".

Isaiah 49:6 "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth".

There were and are rules to obey, initially the Ten Commandment, followed by hundreds of other laws, as seen in Exodus as we read forth.

However the first two laws make it very clear, we Israelites' are to have no other gods, but God who brought them out of captivity. The Shema, Israel's great confession of faith "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"

As we read in our Hebrew Bible the Israelite people throughout their history were to experience great difficulty in obeying God's commandments and maintaining their part of the covenantal responsibility.

In the rugged Sinai desert, God called to Moses, making his presence known, later the trumpet would sound summoning all the people to hear God's words. God the creator clearly made his presence know to his chosen people, to be a nation of priests.

Living Faith; our statement of Christian belief and understanding of God states.

"There is one God
Whom to know is life eternal,
Whom to serve is joy and peace.
God created all that is.
The whole universe testifies
to his majesty and power of its maker."

Despite the lack of faithfulness of the Israelite people, God in his righteousness remained faithful to the covenant, firstly given to Abraham and renewed with Moses at Mount Sinai. God is a patient God a God with a plan for all of humanity.

It is plainly apparent in our Bible; God has never given up on the sinfulness of humanity, to bring about his wishes for his worldly creation, to make it right.

Quoting Bishop N.T. Wright “The purpose of the covenant was never simply that the creator wanted to have Israel as a special people, irrespective of the rest of the world. The covenant was there to deal with and identify sin, and bring about the salvation of the rest of the world”

I add to that my own words. The Jewish people were to be the communicators of God’s will for the rest of the world, by example and word, which did not happen. Israel did not communicate to the pagan world God’s righteous love, God’s wishes to embrace his creation.

Therefore God’s plan, to send his son Jesus with a new covenant, a covenant that would eventually bring saving grace to humanity, to make things right for those who choose to follow him, a life of love and fellowship with God and each other in community.

St. Paul in Galatians states the law was our overseer until Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. We are no longer under the law; we are children of God, the Father of the World through our faith in his son Jesus.

We see Jesus in our Gospel reading in Matthew, Jesus in action, charging his twelve disciples to go forth and proclaim the new “kingdom of God”, a new covenant to the Jews specifically, not to Gentles or Samaritans; again their time would come at Pentecost and with St. Paul.

Allow me to clarify my understanding of, the “Kingdom of God”. It cannot be thought of as territorial, rather it means a condition of humanity having an embedded condition of heart and mind to do God’s will, to love him and our neighbors as ourselves. Where God is Lord of all. The Lord’s Prayer states “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

We see the evidence, Gods Kingdom at work in Christian communities such as here at Claude.

It is important to remember that Israel at the time of Jesus was very difficult socially and economically for most of its people; one was either rich or very poor.

Israel was under a brutal occupation by Rome. Israel was an agrarian society, land generally owned by wealthy land owners, mostly farmed by tenant farmers.

Their token ruler Herod Archways the son of the Great Herod, a family dynasty who owed their position to Roman appointment, was demoted by the Romans because of his sheer brutality. Governance of Judea was given over to the Roman, Pontius Pilate.

Rome required taxation from Israel, as with other vassal states to maintain its vast empire. The temple of Jerusalem, the most Holy of Shrines to the Jewish people, had become the revenue department of the Roman satellite nation.

The place where the Jews’ identified with God of Abraham, was being used for a sacrilegious purposes, for it was here the records of taxation were kept and taxes paid to the tax collectors.

The temple had been desecrated; the religious establishment was in collusion with their oppressors, motivated by self betterment of the priestly establishment.

It was in this context that Jesus was proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God was at hand. By Jesus' miracles, curing illness, raising the dead, feeding the multitudes, showed Jesus empowered by God, his Father.

Jesus the Messiah was not going to lead them to victory over the Roman occupiers, rather he was to bring about and proclaim a new age where the burden of sin and fear of living and existing in this context was to be overcome by a societal love and justice for all people.

A new age where the Sermon on the Mount was the manifesto for the Kingdom of God.

The message Jesus was giving was not just for the period of Jesus' ministry, but for future millennia's for all humankind, till the time of God's Heavenly Kingdom comes to fruition with Jesus as King.

When natural disaster strikes as it has done recently in Burma and China, the first reaction is to take aid in various forms such as food and medical aid to the victims.

Imagine a society that did not have medical capabilities or the ability to look after the very basic needs of its people.

This was the situation in the time of Jesus in Israel.

Just imagine the effect Jesus had on the people; just imagine the resulting pressure put on him by the crowds seeking his help both physically and spiritually.

Jesus teaching and healing was in great demand, Jesus Christ was and is the Superstar; yet how to get the message of his ministry out to all of Israel?

Jesus wishes to focus on the Jewish people, God's plan for the Gentiles and the Samaritans will come later.

“For the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few”. Jesus gave us the Lords Prayer; hear again Jesus suggest prayer to his disciples to pray to his Father, God the provider.

They pray for workers needed to harvest the plentiful harvest, the prayer is answered, and the twelve disciples are to be empowered with the Holy Sprit. The harvest for followers of Jesus continues to this very day.

Have we allowed ourselves to seek empowerment, to be empowered in the manner God wishes us to be empowered, an empowerment suitable for this community we are part of. An empowerment that God wishes, not just what we think.

I recall one summer about twenty five years ago taking my family on a house boating vacation in the Thousand Islands. We rented a thirty foot steel hulled house boat which I had never seen before let alone sailed. I was to be given by the very trusting owner a ten minute instruction on how to sail the craft. Also included in the ten minute instruction were tips on navigation, on the St. Lawrence Seaway, a very busy waterway.

My family nervously boarded, I might add with some justification, I took over the helm and off we went. Obviously we survived that vacation but only just.

On family gatherings I am still being reminded of the number of narrow escapes from possible disaster and ship wreck we narrowly escaped.

The twelve Disciples had been following Jesus in a supportive role, now they were given the task of taking over the helm individually, charged with navigating with great responsibility, the

difficult task of getting the word of the Kingdom of God .to all of the people of Israel.

The task to communicate Jesus message, demonstrating God's concern for those who suffer through life facing sickness, and persecution, a message of hope not despair

The Disciples went forth with Jesus' message of love, demonstrating God's compassion. Knowing they were to face difficulties of rejection, knowing that their existence and well being was in the hands of strangers.

Would they have the strength of character to fulfill the mission? A new opportunity of hope was their message, an opportunity for the people to see, experience and to accept the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. .

What if things had been different, what if the people of Israel and the Temple authorities had totally embraced Jesus as the Messiah and his message.

What if the world had chosen Jesus' path, loving God, neighbor, and self practiced together we can only imagine.

Jesus was eventually to be rejected and suffer death on a cross, not condemned by the people of Israel who he had ministered to, I think this is vital to emphasize; rather he was condemned by the power structure of the ruling establishment.

This man Jesus was causing serious theological and social embarrassment to the people who were in charge, a religious police, a puppet regime led by the Chief Priest appointed at the pleasure of Rome.

Conversely Jesus was very popular with the people, an added source of concern for the rulers of the Temple.

A political decision was made, justified in the national interest. Crucify him.

None of this was in vain, for through Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, giving his life in sacrifice for humanity; we through faith in him are reconciled, having peace with God our creator.

Yes, God is patient in seeing fulfillment his plan for this world, come about.

In the meantime the passage we read of the Disciples ministering in Israel going forth with Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God was to have an everlasting effect on all who seek sanctuary in him, we are here this morning.