

Let Jesus' Resurrection Revolutionize Your Thinking!

Easter Sunday – April 16, 2017

By Fr. Peter Ryan, S.J. and Janis Clarke

Readings: Acts 10.34a, 37-42;
Colossians 3.1-4 or Corinthians 5.6b-8; John 20.1-9

Have you ever had a moment of insight that amounts to a complete revolution in your thinking? Today's gospel describes a revolution in John's thinking, and it invites us to let Jesus' resurrection revolutionize ours, too.

John had just seen his best friend and Lord tortured, crucified, and buried. Do you recall the spiritual – perhaps you sang it on Good Friday – “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Well, John *was* there. He was right there when they nailed Jesus to the tree. He stood under the cross while Jesus was hanging on it. He helped take Jesus' lifeless body down, and he laid him in the tomb.

What Sort of Kingdom?

John had many times heard his Lord speak the word of life. Jesus promised to set his people free by establishing the kingdom, and John was witness to the many healings and other miracles Jesus worked to confirm his words. But now the Lord lay dead, and all seemed lost. Like the other disciples, John, though perhaps the most spiritually insightful among them, had been thinking in terms of a this-worldly kingdom.

When Jesus predicted his death and resurrection, his disciples did not understand. Their hope that he would establish his kingdom here and now hindered them. They failed to see that the healings and other miracles Jesus worked were not meant simply to improve their lives on this side of death but, more importantly, to stir their hope for resurrection life beyond the reach of sickness and death, in the kingdom to come. They were not yet ready to consider a kingdom that would come in its fullness only on the other side of death. So John, seeing Jesus dead, was utterly crushed.

But then John hears that the Lord's body is missing, and he and Peter run to the tomb. John gets there first and looks inside. And what does he see? Not the Lord's body, but only the burial cloth. We are told that John “saw and believed.” The point finally hit home: Jesus' plan all along was to conquer death and establish a kingdom that would extend beyond this fallen world.

Our Difficulties Understanding

The Lord wants his resurrection to revolutionize our thinking as it did John's, so that we too will set our hearts on the kingdom to come rather than on this life. For several reasons we find it very difficult to do that. One reason is that death stands between this life and the next, and like the apostles, we so recoil at the idea of death that we avoid thinking about it. As a result, we don't let the promise of his coming kingdom awaken our hearts and give us joy even now.

Another reason is that we fail to heed Jesus' warnings about hell. We find false comfort in the widespread assumption that hell might turn out to be empty of all human beings or, at worst, be populated only by a small number of extremely wicked people who commit sins unlike those we ourselves might be tempted to commit. Convinced that our salvation is a sure thing, we see no need to think about the life to come, and we focus instead on this present life.

A final reason we fail to set our hearts on the kingdom to come rather than on this life is that, despite what scripture tells us, we assume the kingdom will be so spiritual and supernatural as to be unappealing. We easily forget what Jesus' resurrection reveals – that the kingdom he establishes will involve bodily life.

Even the word *heaven* can give us the wrong idea, by suggesting that the kingdom that God planned for us from the foundation of the world will be somewhere *else*, in some unearthly, purely spiritual place. But that's not what Jesus promises. It's true that we await new heavens and a new earth, but that doesn't mean he's going to wipe this universe out of existence and create all over again out of nothing. It means, rather, that he will transform this present universe so that it will be a suitable place for us to share Jesus' risen bodily life forever.

Instead of focusing on finding fulfillment in this life, we should cherish it as our opportunity to prepare ourselves to enter into the fullness of the Lord's kingdom, which offers ultimate and everlasting fulfillment.

Our situation is something like that of the unborn child. The child is warm and well provided for in the womb, but who knows what it's like outside the womb? And who wants to go through the trauma of birth to get there? Similarly, living comfortably in this world – or trying to – we tend to set our hopes on the here and now. Who knows what lies beyond this life? And who wants to go through the trauma of death to get there?

But surely God's plan in creating us is not only our coming to birth and living this present life, just as his purpose for us is not simply our coming to be and living in the womb. God's plan is really for us to be born into the kingdom and live our lives there forever, just as he wanted us to come to birth and live outside the womb.

A New Perspective

Let me repeat the point: God's plan is really for us to come to birth in the kingdom and live our lives there! That definitive kingdom is what God is ultimately creating. He is preparing it for us. In fact, in his description of the final judgment in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells those who have lived good lives in this world, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

It's true, of course, that this present world is a gift, and a very good gift indeed. But its full significance is no more limited to the present life than the full significance of our life in utero is limited to the womb. Rather, just as our life before birth is meant to shape and prepare us for life in this world, this present life is meant to do the same with respect to our life in the kingdom. And our present life will do that only to the degree that we cooperate with grace by choosing as well as we can. In doing so, the character we shape will be saintly, and unless we undo our good choices by falling into sin, the saintly character we construct through God's grace will be ours forever in the kingdom.

In short, just as God has prepared the kingdom for us, we must cooperate with his grace to prepare ourselves for the kingdom. Sometimes, however, our efforts to do so seem to be utterly fruitless. What should we think when we are not able to accomplish the good that we seem called to do? We should not expect our lives to make complete sense in this world. We should not expect them to turn out beautiful and well proportioned and perfectly acceptable from a this-worldly perspective because, again, we are cooperating with God's plan for our life in the kingdom. Even if unsuccessful from a this-worldly perspective, our best efforts constitute solid building material that God will use to construct his kingdom.

Jesus understood this well. From a purely this-worldly perspective, his Passion and death suggest that his life was a failure. But when we realize that his whole life on earth was aimed at the kingdom beyond this life, and that his resurrection launches that kingdom, then we see that Jesus was gloriously successful.

The apostles finally understood this, and after receiving the Holy Spirit, they proclaimed this message with great courage. "We are his witnesses," St. Peter says. "We ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead!" Peter goes on to explain that if we turn to Christ, he will forgive our sins, and we will have nothing to fear but will instead enter into joy – joy that will never end – when he comes to judge the living and the dead.

Indeed, as St. Paul explains, if we cooperate with God's grace, then we already have the principle of our resurrection within us. If we die to ourselves and focus not on this world but on the life to come, we have already been raised in spirit with Christ and will be prepared for his coming. Let's follow Paul's exhortation: "Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory."

About the Authors

Fr. Peter Ryan, S.J. teaches at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit.

Janis Clarke is president and founder of Word for Life Rosary Mission: <http://www.rosarymission.org>

FOR FURTHER READING

Deacon Keith Fournier, "The Kingdom of God Is Among You. What Did Jesus Mean?" available at: <http://www.catholic.org/homily/yearoffaith/story.php?id=53255>

St. John Paul II, "All Are Called to Build God's Kingdom," available at: <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3274>

Rev. Rick Poblocki, "The Meaning and Effects of the Resurrection of Jesus," available at: <https://www.thestationofthecross.com/catholic-qa-the-meaning-and-effects-of-the-resurrection-of-jesus/>

Hugh Pope, "Kingdom of God," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at: www.newadvent.org/cathen/08646a.htm

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The disciples failed to see that miracles Jesus worked were meant to stir their hope for resurrection life beyond the reach of sickness and death in the kingdom to come.***
- ***We await new heavens and a new earth, but that doesn't mean God is going to wipe this universe out of existence and create all over again out of nothing.***
- ***Rather, he will transform this present universe so that it will be a suitable place for us to share Jesus' risen bodily life forever.***
- ***Just as God has prepared the kingdom for us, we must cooperate with his grace to prepare ourselves for the kingdom.***
- ***We should not expect our lives to make complete sense in this world or to turn out well from a this-worldly perspective.***
- ***If we die to ourselves and focus not on this world but on the life to come, we have already been raised in spirit with Christ and will be prepared for his coming.***