

Questions worth asking: What is reality?? Hebrews 12:18-29

Hook: In Bologna with Fr. Robert Sirico/Acton Institute (A think tank: “Building a free and virtuous society through the integration of Biblical and free market principles”). Shared with me over lunch the re-formation of Sacred Heart Academy>> **what he did** (renovate the buildings, give low income families reduced tuition according to their “sweat equity” in the renovations, re-vitalize the curriculum to ensure that the curriculum of the school would reflect a love of truth, goodness and beauty, and a fidelity to the Western educational tradition, and a new vision focusing on the school’s role in assisting families, forming Catholics, and cultivating culture.

To that end he invited a large home-schooling community in Grand Rapids to participate.... Got rid of a costly and wasteful government lunch program and encouraged parents to provide lunches form their children. They did—and those kids without lunches were fed by volunteers on an as needed basis. **NOW, 400 students and parents show up DAILY for Mass**—the only school in the diocese where that takes place... AND the fastest growing RC parochial school in the nation ! **“HOW”?? A--Confidence in the Gospel, confidence in what Jesus, the Bible and teaches about reality, about what it means to be well off, to be a good person, and how to get there...**

****How would you like to have the confidence that Fr. Sirico, the faculty, staff children and parents of Sacred Heart Academy have in the gospel and its answer to those four questions.**

Dallas Willard in his lectures and writings: There are **4 questions everyone needs to answer** to the “bane or blessing” at some point in their life?

1. **What is reality?** *God and His Kingdom*
2. **Who is well off?** *Anyone who is alive in the Kingdom of God through JC*
3. **Who is a truly good person?** *Anyone who is pervaded by the transforming love of JC*
4. **How does one become a truly good person?** *By placing your whole trust in Jesus Christ and become his student or apprentice in Kingdom living*

What does our culture say about those 4 questions? A stark contrast...The culture in which we live says reality is:

- Only what you can see, touch, taste and feel with your bodily senses or comprehend with your mind>>> **SO, gratify the flesh and its desires**

- Unlimited autonomy or freedom of an individual to define reality any way he wants>>> *terminal narcissism and loss of both a “common good” and “community”*
- A never-ending power struggle between the victim/oppressed and the victimizer/oppressor>>> *which must always result in an overthrow of the oppressor, the enthronement of the oppressed which begins a new struggle*
- **ALL agree** that reality ends effectively for people when we die, and your only hope beyond death is some memory or legacy that will live on in the lives of people who will also die...

Our culture also says that the person who is well off is the one who is being freed from oppression, that the truly good person is the one who helps free OTHER people from their oppression, and that the way to become such a good person is to be tolerant of all points of view except those that claim a reality beyond the material and a particular way rooted in absolutes—as we find in the Bible. **THEN** one becomes GOOD, according to the culture, by active intolerance of such views.

*****That’s the situation we face in our post-Christian culture:*** People are LOST because they don’t know what reality really is, and they don’t know the REAL answer to the other three questions either! And under unrelenting pressure to compromise with the culture, even Biblically faithful followers of Jesus Christ find it tempting to stop engaging the culture, to retreat...and maybe even lose a little confidence in what the BIBLE has to say about reality, in order to get along...

*****BUT THIS PASSAGE WE JUST READ IN HEBREWS WAS WRITTEN TO GIVE US CONFIDENCE IN WHAT THE BIBLE HAS TO SAY ABOUT REALITY!*** This passage we have read in Hebrews addresses that first question “What IS reality and how does one live in that reality? Or to use the central image we heard last week about running our race well, “WHERE and TO WHOM are we running and HOW do we get there?”

So, What is reality? Read Hebrews 12:28-29. The word for kingdom means REIGN.. it is not the reign of a human being or document or process.. it’s King and ruler is God, “who is a consuming fire”.

“We **are receiving** a Kingdom”: the present-participle in the Greek emphasizing that followers of Jesus Christ are now **in the process of receiving this gift and that this process will continue into the future.** This unshakeable kingdom is not the gift of a constitution, or government or any other human institution or process—it is the gift of God. It is a continuing gift of God, who is “*a consuming fire*” --literally

whose glory would consume us as he warned Moses and others if we ever looked upon him directly.

The unshakable kingdom we are receiving as followers of Jesus Christ is not a movement or a church. **It is literally the reign of God.** Dallas Willard captured the Biblical essence of this “kingdom” as “the range of God’s effective will, where what God wants done *is done*.” Therefore it is defined by the clarity, authority and inspiration of God’s revealed word, the Bible.

Hebrews is a book of contrasts: old and new covenant, light and darkness, priesthood of Melchizedek and priesthood of Jesus.... This passage describes reality in terms of the contrast between Mt Sinai and Mt Zion...and in doing so it says three important things about REALITY, about the unshakable KOG we ARE receiving:

1. It is a SPIRITUAL KINGDOM (Read 12:18-22a)

NOT Mt. Sinai- BUT Rather Mt. Zion:: There’s an **implied contrast** here between the physical features of Mt Sinai where the law was given, and the spiritual REALITY of Mt. Zion, the new and heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God! There is a **contrast** between the blazing holiness of God here, the darkness gloom and terror of his overwhelming voice and the command to **STAY AWAY** from his unapproachable presence...and the **INVITATION** to listen to and speak with God directly under the new covenant through the blood of Jesus Christ. There is an invitation to come up by a new and living way (10:25), through Jesus Christ, and NOT to stay away! There is a **new ACCESS to the throne of God** who is no longer unapproachable—and when we accept that invitation to come up that new and living way, whom do we find but a living priest who is interceding for you and me—Jesus himself (7:25). **We arrive not at the foot of an unapproachable earthly mountain, but at the foot of a gloriously accessible and eternal city!**

This continuing gift of an unshakable kingdom, whose giver is God himself, and whose incarnation is Jesus Christ, is a gift that comes *with power*. It’s the power of Jesus whose love can change everything and who is constantly interceding for us. It is a power and a glory that sends us to our knees in thanksgiving and worship. **But even more than that, this spiritual kingdom is a GIFT THAT WE ARE MEANT TO SHARE WITH OTHERS, so that they too can receive the liberating and transforming love of Jesus Christ**—who provides a power beyond ourselves to change ourselves, our families, our schools, our communities—even a nation! *Thy Kingdom come, O LORD thy will be done--* **It may be a spiritual**

Kingdom, but it is meant to be shared WITH TANGIBLE CHANGE FOR THE GOOD, where what God wants done IS done every day, in every way, in every area of our lives AND our neighbors!

2. It is an ETERNAL Kingdom

Not Mt. Sinai, But rather Mt Zion: You see it's not just a new covenant! It's a new place, **a new DESTINY for all those who follow Jesus Christ... an ETERNAL DESTINY because this Kingdom belongs to the realm of divine, imperishable reality!!**

Our own experience, our own limited vision, and the Bible itself reminds us that **the best is yet to come.** That we are like people standing on tiptoe, craning our necks to see the fullness of God's glory just beyond the limit of our horizon.

But did you catch what the author of Hebrews says to these believers and to you and me?! Read 12:22-24.. "you HAVE come... you HAVE come... you HAVE come..." You and I are not just on the way—***We've made it!*** our feet are ***already*** inside the gates of this eternal Kingdom, the heavenly city of God! Though we see them not with our physical eyes, we are surrounded by the reality of innumerable angels and those first born and enrolled in heaven, gathering for the festival of another lost sheep come home; we are surrounded by the eternal reality of the spirits of those righteous who have gone before us and who are cheering us on! And the life we now live in this mortal body is the beginning of an adventure into that eternal Kingdom that never ends, which CS Lewis describes in those great words in *The Chronicles of Narnia*-- ***"farther up and further in.."*** until we are in the very presence of Jesus, the King himself.

And unlike Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, who trembled in fear, we come to JESUS, the mediator of the new covenant "whose sprinkled blood" as our sacrifice lamb speaks a better word than ANY other sacrifice! What confidence! What immediate access to this eternal Kingdom! This speaks of grace and pardon and blessings that are eternal! And when we say at every Holy Eucharist "Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us, once and for all," we anticipate that feast day when in eternal glory we will say that to Him face to face!!

3. It is an UNSHAKABLE Kingdom

NOT Mt Sinai: a mountain quaking and shaking with fire. *Read 12:25-29*
There's a warning here—"once more": there will come a day when everything in the material universe that our culture says is reality—there will come a day when the whole material universe will be shaken to pieces and the ONLY thing left will be **Mt Zion:** the unshakable Kingdom of God to which followers of Jesus belong now. Immovable. Unshaken. "A kingdom that cannot be shaken."

I love what Raymond Brown says in *Christ Above All* about this very point:
"Where everything around them was being shaken, these believers were not to be afraid, but to rejoice in the secure, immovable kingdom to which they most certainly belonged." (at 245)

That's a word for us too: We have confidence as citizens of an unshakable Kingdom that will never end. We have confidence in the gospel of the King, Jesus Christ, and his transforming love. **And that gives us confidence to engage our culture with the good news of Jesus Christ at every level, in every place—**

- *That reality is God and his Kingdom*
- *That Anyone can be well off who is alive in the Kingdom of God through JC*
- *That Anyone who is pervaded by the transforming love of JC is a good person*
- *That the way to become a truly good person is By placing your whole trust in Jesus Christ and become his student or apprentice in Kingdom living*

Appeal: Passage intended to inspire an immediate response: ***In the light of this spiritual, eternal and unshakable Kingdom to which belong, how should we then live??***

1. We must be **OBEDIENT** (to the WHOLE word of God)

"See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks..." (12:25). Love the Message paraphrase: *"So don't turn a deaf ear to these gracious words. If those who ignored earthly warnings didn't get away with it, what will happen to us if we turn our backs on heavenly warnings?"* You see, God's word shares the nature of his Kingdom: His word has spiritual power to change us from the inside out. His word is eternally relevant and his commands are for all time. His word is truth unshakable.

That verb "refuse" means literally that people are begging not to hear another word—to decline any further. It's the kind of attitude some of you may have seen in the news about some high-profile Christian authors and "influencers" openly

renouncing their faith in Christ. They came under pressure, they caved in, and they said “I just don’t want to hear any more.” The truth is, to justify their compromises, they were already beginning to pick and choose cafeteria style what to believe and what to discard from God’s word. ***Followers of Jesus Christ are obedient to the WHOLE word—not just the parts we like. And the parts we don’t like, we listen, study question and wrestle with in the Bible studies and home groups that we have here at CCA, and elsewhere, until we do come to an understanding-- “so that we don’t turn a deaf ear” to the gracious words of King Jesus!***

2. We must be **CONFIDENT** (therefore ENGAGE our culture as we can with the Good news of the Gospel)

As followers of Jesus Christ, we actually belong to the order of things that cannot be shaken! What that means is that no matter how many things are “shaking” around us: political turmoil, social pressures to conform to the culture, financial challenges, religious apostasy, violence and terrorism—***we DO NOT DESPAIR!*** The news doesn’t fill us with despair. We don’t retreat, we engage in the confidence we have in Christ, his word and his unshakable Kingdom. Our trust is in God (read the Psalms!!) and the safety he gives us as he places us on the “rock that is higher than we are”!

3. We must be **REVERENT** (not arrogant or pugnacious)

This continuing gift of an unshakable kingdom, whose giver is God himself, and whose manifestation is Jesus Christ, is a gift that comes *with power*. It is a power and a glory that sends us to our knees in thanksgiving and worship, ***“with reverence and awe” (12:29) That’s the only posture appropriate to such a gift!***

But it’s not only reverence and awe for God the giver—it’s reverence and awe for the lives of people who are our neighbors, critics and even hostile to the faith-- reverence those who, as CS Lewis declares in *The Weight of Glory*, are “no ordinary people,” but in the light of REALITY, people who have the capacity to become either everlasting splendors or eternal horrors. ***So we treat even those with whom we disagree with reverence and respect, as we hold out to them the word of life!***

Closing Illustrn: CNN on Christmas day: the set up... the conversation—determined to turn it to Jesus...the response! Haven’t been invited back ☺, but who knows who might have been needing to hear about REALITY: JC!!