Sermon Follow-up
12/18/11
Prophecies of the Messiah: The Invading King and His Peaceable Kingdom
Isaiah 2:1-4
Rich Lusk

Isaiah's vision was of the latter days, of the future. And that future is *NOW!* We are living in the new era promised by the prophets. We should expect to see – and work towards – the world Isaiah describes.

Perhaps there is nothing we can do about establishing peace between nations. (Of course, we can *pray* – which the greatest weapon of all! But not many of us will find ourselves negotiating with world leaders.) However, we can still play a part in bringing peace to earth. If the gospel can bring peace to warring nations, surely it can bring peace to "warring" family members, schoolmates, neighbors, etc. One way we can prove the gospel brings peace is by bringing peace to our own relationships. If you are alienated from another church member or family member or neighbor, know that God can heal that breach. In truth, people get sideways with each other for the same reasons nations go to war – they feel they have been mistreated or didn't get what they believe they were owed or feel insulted – and the answer to the conflict is the same. Jesus is the peacemaker at every level of human society. Jesus can take away bitterness and help us forgive. We need to pray he would bring his peace into our lives.

Isaiah 2 makes clear that the word of the Lord must go out from the church. The church is the appointed agent for getting the word out to the nations, which means the future of the world hinges on our faithful preaching and evangelization.

When Isaiah describes the nations being discipled, he's basically talking about the formation of what has been called "Christendom."

Oliver O'Donovan on Christendom as the outcome and fruit of the church's mission:

> Yet readiness for martyrdom is not the only form the Church's mission must take. Since true martyrdom is a powerful force and its resistance to Antichrist effective, the Church must be prepared to welcome the homage of the kings when it is offered to the Lord of the martyrs. The growth of the Church, its enablement to reconstruct civilisational practices and institutions,

> its effectiveness in communicating the Gospel: these follow from the courage of the martyrs, and the Church honours them when it seizes the opportunities they have made available to it. No honour is paid to martyrs if they are presented as mere dissidents, whose sole glory was to refuse the cultural order that was on offer to them. Martyrdom is, as the word indicates, witness, pointing to an alternative offer. The witness is vindicated when it is carried through in a positive mode, saying yes as well as saying no, encouraging the acts of repentance and change by which the powers offer homage to Christ

Michael Goheen comments:

> O'Donovan recognizes that this interpretation of Christendom leads him away from Stanley Hauerwas. While he acknowledges the force of Hauerwas's critique of Christendom, O'Donovan challenges Hauerwas's notion that Christians were attempting to further the kingdom by use of political power. The account of the early church was that those who held power became subject to the rule of Christ and used that power in the service of His kingdom. While this harboured danger and temptation, the early church did not see this as a reason to refuse the triumph Christ had won among the nations. It is "this triumph of Christ among the nations [that] Hauerwas is not prepared to see." While Newbigin is more aware than O'Donovan of the dangers of Christendom on the mission of the church, there are many points of agreement between them.

Goheen further comments on Newbigin's view of Christendom in contrast with contemporary critics of Christendom:

> First, Newbigin's analysis of Christendom is much more ambivalent than that of the authors of *Missional Church*. The evaluation of the latter is entirely negative while Newbigin sees many positive features in Christendom. He believes that the Christendom settlement was a worthwhile attempt to translate the universal claims of Christ into social and political terms. Through this thousand-year period the gospel permeated many aspects of social, political, moral, personal, and economic life and western culture continues to live on the capital of that period. Undoubtedly it was his missionary experience in a country where the gospel did not have a lengthy history that enabled Newbigin to evaluate the Christendom experiment much more positively.
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> For the writers of *Missional Church* Christendom *necessarily* distorts and even eclipses the church's mission. Acceptance of power contradicts the posture to which the church is called. For Newbigin Christendom posed many dangers to the church's mission, dangers that were unfortunately realized. Nevertheless Christendom provided an opportunity for the church to work out the claims of Christ's Lordship in its mission.

He believes that faithfulness to the mission of the church demanded that it not refuse responsibility for the public order. Faithfulness to Jesus who was Lord of history and culture required the church to bring politics under the authority of Christ in spite of the dangers and temptations. Part of the history and legacy of Christendom is what Oliver O'Donovan calls the 'obedience of the rulers', the fruit of which remains in the West to the present day (O'Donovan 1996:212-216). *Missional Church* leans toward an interpretation of Christendom that neglects important emphases in Newbigin's writing.
Second, while Newbigin affirms the importance of the communal witness of the church, he believes that the primary missionary encounter between the church and the world takes place in the callings of individual believers in society. On the one hand, "the most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order" (1991h:85). On the other hand, the church must "equip its members for active and informed participation in the public life of society in such a way that the Christian faith shapes that participation" (1991h:81); believers are to act as "subversive agents" in a culture shaped by a story that is in tension with the gospel. Christians ought to seek responsible positions of power and leadership to shape the public life of culture (1991h:84). Newbigin does not contrast the individual and communal dimensions of the church's mission but maintains them with equal emphasis.
The most striking contrast between Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology and the ecclesiology formulated in *The Missional Church* is found at this point. Newbigin believes that the primary way in which the church pursues its missional calling in culture is by "continually nourishing and sustaining men and women who will act responsibly as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens" (1989e:139). Here, in the life of believers in culture, the primary missionary engagement takes place. This insight permeates the rest of his ecclesiology. By contrast, *Missional Church* does not mention the mission of believers in culture. This remarkable difference between Newbigin and the authors of *Missional Church* shows up at other points as well. For Newbigin the importance of the mission of the laity demanded ecclesial structures that would equip them for their task. Yet, in an otherwise helpful discussion in *Missional Church*, there is no mention of ecclesial structures that would prepare the laity for their callings (Guder 1998:221-247). When Newbigin ocused his ministry on training leadership in Madras, a constant refrain was how to find ways to enable the laity in their callings. In *Missional Church* we find an excellent discussion of leadership but, again, no mention of the training of the laity for their callings in public life (Guder 1998:183- 220). What burned brightly in the heart of Newbigin and found expression throughout his missionary ecclesiology is noticeably absent from *Missional Church*. There, emphasis on the communal dimension of the church's mission has eclipsed the mission of the laity the place Newbigin believed the primary missionary encounter takes place.

(Quotations taken from Goheen's *"As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You": J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*.)

Mike Warren and Joseph Ton on communism, the gospel, and the power of optimism:

> Whittaker Chambers, the famous defector from Communism, testified to the power of an optimistic view of history among Communists:
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> > I resolved to break with the Communist Party at whatever risk to my life or to myself and my family. Yet, so strong is the hold which the insidious evil of Communism secures upon its disciples, that I could still say to someone at that time: 'I know that I am leaving the winning side for the losing side, but it is better to die on the losing side than to live under Communism.'
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> Ironically, Communism borrowed its vision of historical victory from Christianity. But like Chambers, many modern Christians have more faith in the power of Satan's people to triumph in history than God's people. Chamber's defeatist thinking immobilized him from building a viable alternative to replace Communism. Modern Christians are immobilized by the same defeatist thinking. They know that God is powerful enough to take a few more people to heaven, but He's not powerful enough to move in the hearts of enough people to completely transform a nation to serve Him. Living after the break-up of the Soviet Empire, it should be easier for Christians today to see that God can triumph in history, even over such apparently formidable foes as Communism. But Christians are still suffering from having been paralyzed by the sickness of "rapture fever." After more than a century of believing that Russia would take over the world and start Armageddon, are Christians prepared to offer something workable in Communism's place? Are we ready to *show* the world that Jesus is the answer? The practical implications of believing in the defeat of God's people in history versus believing in victory is well expressed in a speech made by Romanian pastor Josef Ton:
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> > Here is what I told [my friend]: "Communism is an experiment that failed. . . . When communism collapses, somebody has to be there to rebuild society! I believe our job as Christian teachers is to train leaders so that they will be ready and capable to rebuild our society on a Christian basis!" To my surprise, here is what my friend said to me: "Josef, you are wrong. Communism will triumph all over the world, because this is the movement of the Antichrist. And when the communists take over the United States, they will have no restraining force left. They will then kill all the Christians. We have only one job to do: alert the world and make ready to die." A few years later my

> friend was forced to leave Romania. He came to the U.S. and settled down. Then I was forced into exile, and I moved to the U.S. as well. Since then, my friend has not done anything for Romania. He simply waited for the final triumph of communism and the annihilation of Christianity. On the other hand, when I came here in 1981, I started a training program for Christian leaders in Romania. We translated Christian textbooks, and smuggled them into Romania. With our partners in the organization, The Biblical Education by Extension (BEE), we trained about 1200 people all over Romania. Today, those people who were trained in that underground operation are the leaders in churches, in evangelical denominations, and in key Christian ministries."

How do we build a case against the privatization of Christian faith, and for "Christendom"?

Other Christians in other parts of the world know intuitively that privatization is an impossibility -- unless, of course, they've been corrupted by our peculiar version of "Christianity." Building a case that way may get more traction than trying to build a case historically, since interpretations of the history vary so much. Christians who are part of minority groups, or who are poor, just aren't interested in a gospel message that does not include a promise of social renewal. The only Christians interested in a privatized gospel are comfortable, urban/suburban, highly educated, and wealthy -- in other words, highly vested in preserving the status quo. A privatized gospel just won't "preach" in the slums and ghettos.

Does Christendom threaten religious liberty?

Religious liberty is actually a Christian (that is, Constantinain) invention. The freedom of the church to be the church, and thus to carry forward her mission, entails the freedom of people to reject the church and her message. True theocracy is not tyrannical; indeed, it's the only real guarantee of freedom. Only the transcendent authority of God's law can protect us from the tyranny of the state's law. But the political application of God's law in this age of history does not persecute unbelievers simply for being unbelievers; to do so would bring the mandate of the state into conflict with the mandate of the church. I have talked before about "Constantine's Missional Theocracy." Constantine was not a tyrant; he was a champion of personal freedom. Unless someone wants to defend the right of people to slaughter massive numbers of animals for religious purposes -- not likely in the modern West! -- it's hard to argue against what Constantine did, once you get the historical facts straight. He outlawed pagan sacrifice (and every modern society does as well) but he did not outlaw paganism per se. In a way, you could say, he required the privatization of paganism. But Constantine, following Lanctantius,

respected the conscience even of the unbeliever, though in a way consistent with pursuing the overarching common good, which is ultimately found in Christ.

The reason we cannot comprehend a Constantinian-type theocracy (or christocracy) as a good thing is because we cannot comprehend a society in which there is such a thing as an overarching common good. When American politicians talk about the common good -- which they rarely do -- it's just empty rhetoric. What the "good" that we hold in "common"? There isn't one. Rather, American, liberal democracy is premised on the view that each individual chooses his own good. But as we may be on the cusp of learning, when individual goods conflict and there is no good way to arbitrate between them because there is no law above the law of the state, violence becomes the only solution.

The lone exception for evangelicals in America seems to be the abortion issue. We think it serves the common good to protect the weakest and most innocent members of society, those still in the womb. For some reason, we think on this one issue, there is a "divine right" to impose God's law on people who don't like it for their own well being. I think we need to explore more deeply the "logic" behind the evangelical impulse to seek the outlawing of abortion. Why do we care if unbelievers want to destroy their own offspring? Why does it matter?

It's often asked today, "What good has come out of Christendom?"

The common anti-Western, medieval-hating view prevalent in the academy right now makes the historical case for Christendom difficult -- you have to fight politically-correct prejudices. However, books like Alvin Schmidt's *Under the Influence* show that, in reality, many good things have come out of Christendom...and to not acknowledge that is a form of ingratitude to the work of the Spirit through our fathers and mothers in the faith. I think the disconnect between mission and Christendom is due to a flawed eschatology. You probably have to be some form of postmillennialist/optimistic amillennialist to get that link. You have to exercise an eschatological imagination, as Leithart is doing when he says, 'What if they ask? What if they listen?' I'd add the question, at the risk of sounding triumphalistic, 'What if we win?'

I think American Christians will be very surprised by what nations in other parts of the world start to look like when their Christian population hits a critical mass. Philip Jenkins called his book The Next Christendom for a reason (e.g., http://www.leithart.com/archives/003130.php).