

WHAT SHALL I RENDER TO THE LORD?

Matthew 11:25-30

Matthew places Jesus prayer in the context of John the Baptist's misunderstanding, and the villagers rejection. Misunderstanding and rejection doesn't seem to be promising stuff for producing thanksgiving. But in Jesus they do. Here's the prayer.

"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to the "little ones; yes, Father, for such is your gracious will."

This is a prayer I like very much: unprovoked, spontaneous, exuberant thanksgiving. The circumstances in which this thanksgiving erupts into the Jesus story are grim, hardly conducive to thanksgiving. The grim conditions consist of a misunderstanding by the person most deeply involved in launching Jesus on his way as Messiah, and then, compounding the misunderstanding, a rejection by the people in the villages in which Jesus spent most of his early ministry, the men and women who had seen Jesus in action and listened to him talk.

Here's the misunderstanding: Jesus has just been approached by John's disciples asking him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matt 11:3) John at this current time is locked up in Machaerus, a high security prison. Herod the Great built it. His son Herod Antipas, has put John there for the 'political' crime, calling him on the carpet for his adultery with Herodius, his brother Phillips's wife. John's prophetic voice is no longer heard in the land. It will soon be silenced for good at a gruesome birthday party, no candles, just a human head dripping with blood.

John was the voice of Isaiah that introduced Jesus as the long anticipated Messiah to the people of Palestine. His preaching prepared the way for Jesus to be received as "the one who is to come," inaugurating the Kingdom of Heaven.

As John prepared the way of the Lord he captured the attention of the entire country. When Jesus was baptized a voice was heard proclaiming, "This is my Son the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased (Matt 3:17)

With that, John's work is done. He slips off to the sidelines to not get in the way of the Way: "He must increase, but I must decrease." Jesus moves into the center: those sidelines for John turn out to be the prison. John is content to "decrease," but understandably he is waiting for news reporting on Jesus and his "increase." Reports were apparently sparse. Jesus isn't capturing headlines. Restless to know what is going on he sends disciples for an accounting from Jesus. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"(Matt 11:3) Is John feeling as so many feel today, that Jesus is not sufficiently messianic? The Messiah has arrived; the kingdom of heaven is at hand. What's taking so long? Nothing seems to have changed. John is in prison and Herod is carrying on as arrogant as ever.

Jesus reassured John's disciples, "Yes, I am the Messiah. Yes, I am doing the messianic work as defined in Isaiah's text that John preached, But maybe not in quite the way John is expecting it."

John and Jesus were different in the way they went about their work. John preached in thunder to popular acclaim; Jesus told stories over meals and with friends on the road. John was a public figure confronting the high profile sin of Herod Antipas in the public square. Jesus worked for the most part inconspicuously in the small villages of Galilee. John was ascetic in diet and clothing; Jesus enjoyed a glass of wine, even at times in the company of disreputable outsiders. It is understandable that John might wonder what was going on and be offended at Jesus' way of doing things and going about his messianic work. Where is the increase that John was expecting? Where are the swelling crowds, the dramatic confrontations with the dissolute powers that be?

Jesus reassures John in his perplexity, "Yes, John, I am doing exactly what you prophesied so well, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...? Let me bless you in your prison cell as you bless me in my ways as I carry out the messianic work in which you launched me, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matt 11:6)

And the people in the villages with whom Jesus lived? They essentially ignored him. If John the Baptist's misunderstanding was a disappointment to Jesus, the indifference of the people was more a slap in the face.

Most of Jesus' early kingdom of heaven, messianic work was done in three small villages-Bethsaida and Capernaum on the north shore of Lake Galilee, and inland, about an hour's walk. Chorazin. Most of Jesus' 'mighty works' took place in these villages. (Matthew 11:20): the healing of a blind man, a paralytic, a Roman Centurion's dying son, and a demoniac among others. Most of Jesus' disciples came from these villages. Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum and made his home there, taught in the synagogue there, and used the village as a base for his kingdom of heaven work until he went to the cross in Jerusalem.

All of the villages were within walking distance of each other. They were small villages, villages in which everyone would be known and recognized. No one in a small town is anonymous. No one would have been ignorant of Jesus. All would know the stories of his healings. Many would have heard him preach.

Many, perhaps most ignored him. Turned a deaf ear. Dismissed Jesus as irrelevant to their lives. Jesus compares the three small villages to three large, prosperous, infamously evil cities of ancient times: Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. "You think those pagan hotbeds of evil were bad? You are worse. You think that just because you don't live in sexual squalor and godless immorality and filth you are a cut above the rest of the world? You are teetering on the brink of hell. Willful indifference to God is the worst thing. A steely refusal to repent, to stubbornly persist in a complacent, self satisfied life, is a doomed life. God is present among you and you are saying with your lives that you aren't interested.

There is evil that doesn't look like evil. The evil rampant in the villages was the exposure of their active indifference to God, their refusal to leave the ruts of conventional ordinariness. They are mired in a colorless banality, an inconspicuous evil that makes no headlines but outdoes Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon. They recognize God as God, yet deliberately snub him. Jesus generously offers them a participating life in the Kingdom of God, and they shrug their shoulders.

The person who understood Jesus best misunderstood him, misunderstood Jesus failure to get him out of prison, and misunderstood Jesus' avoidance of public charisma as being non-messianic. The people who knew Jesus best in his and their daily lives didn't know him, didn't embrace his presence among them as savior and healer, friend of sinners, and bread of the world.

These are the conditions in which Jesus was immersed the day he broke into a most exuberant thanksgiving. "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. (Little Ones)

The reason I am extravagant in my liking of this prayer of thanksgiving is because there is nothing in the "circumstances" to account for it.

The conditions, John's misunderstanding of Jesus' Messianic ways and the villagers mulish indifference to his messianic presence, are depressing. The conditions would seem to face Jesus with a serious reassessment of the way he had been going about as being Messiah. If John didn't get it and his neighbors didn't get it, maybe he had better try something different.

So how do we account for the thanksgiving? Only, I think, by realizing that John's misunderstanding and the villager's indifference-conditions that called into question the effectiveness of Jesus, is nothing more than a parched crust on the surface of the kingdom. Beneath that heavily trafficked hardpan the kingdom of heaven is coming into being in God's way. Jesus knows that God's way is to work his gracious will with the childlike, the simple, those who have not fallen into the habits of thinking "they are like gods," who don't need God, those who haven't let inattentive familiarity with worship anesthetize them into supposing they know exactly how God works.

Wise and prudent are ironic in the prayer. I would suggest sophisticated and know it alls to catch the tone in which Jesus speaks the words. It doesn't thwart Jesus that the man who knows more about the Messiah than anyone else and has attracted great crowds by his preaching now misunderstands what is taking place. It doesn't throw Jesus that all these good villagers, their eyes glazed over and their ears dulled by the complacencies of a self satisfied religion, don't see and hear God's work right before them.

Misunderstanding and indifference are, like the poor, always with us. They are not reliable indicators of the presence of the kingdom. Pollsters who love to inform the

world on the statistical status of God, have no prophetic credibility in kingdom matters. Jesus does not put out his messianic strategy for referendum every couple of years.

And so the conditions that often induce hand ringing and gnashing of teeth among so many of us are put away by Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving. Hidden kingdom energies surge just beneath the surface all around us. Huge subterranean rivers of prayer, faith, obedience and praise, intercession and forgiveness and deliverance, holiness and grace, flow freely underground. And in virtually every nook and cranny on earth, obscure in the shadow, overlooked in the crowds are the "little ones." These are the babes and infants that God has always used as a bulwark to still the enemy and avenger.

Jesus does not minimize the conditions; he takes them very seriously indeed. He confronts and rebukes. He exposes pretensions and weeps over hardened hearts. But he doesn't despair. He doesn't second guess the Father. He doesn't dilute his holy resolve with something less than holy.

And so we give thanksgiving. Not just for the wildflowers and butterflies, for the moonlight on a blanket of snow, for athletic grace and symphonic sound. Thanksgiving is certainly appropriate for all that gives witness to goodness and truth and beauty, and so it doesn't surprise us when it is given under these favorable conditions. But Jesus' thanksgiving surprises us. Jesus' thanksgiving is honey on the rock. (Duet 32:13) May you find something to thank God for on this day, beginning with the forgiveness you receive in the Lord's Supper. God's great gifts are not always obvious, and the kingdom of heaven doesn't always seem apparent. But Jesus tells us they are there, they are working and one day we will see it, regardless of what our circumstances are right now. For this we give thanks to God.