

The Seat of Moses

Matthew 23:1-12; Hebrews 13:7-17

This letter to the Hebrews which we have studied for so long was written to address the fact that for a single century, the first century A.D., there were two peoples of God, one people, Israel, belonging to the past, and another people, the Christian Church, belonging to the future. You'll remember that I said a few weeks ago that, in Matthew 24, just days before the crucifixion, Jesus put old Israel on a one generation clock, warning his disciples that all the grandeur and beauty of the old brick and mortar temple in Jerusalem would get taken down once and for all within a generation of his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

So with the benefit of hindsight we know that old Israel was on the wane and that the Church was on the rise, but the problem was that old Israel didn't see, wouldn't accept that with the coming of Christ, God and time had passed them by. So, in the very same era that the Christian apostles had taken to the sea lanes and highways all around the Mediterranean to announce the good news that Israel's God had sent a Savior with forgiveness and love and help for all kinds of people everywhere, in that very same era, the Israelites sent out rabbi's with a very different message.

The way to God, the rabbi's taught, was back through Sinai, to double down on the laws and rituals and disciplines of Moses, which if they mastered them, would gain them the visions and clouds and angels, the mastery and power of old Israel's prophets and heroes. Which was different than what Jesus' promised the meek and those who mourn, the persecuted and the small, children and slaves.

Contrary to what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, the rabbi's imagined that salvation and freedom belonged to the bold and the powerful. And the rabbi's false gospel was made all the more compelling by the fact that old Israel was about to take up the sword and strike out against the Romans, the very people that Jesus had taught the Apostles to reach out for with God's forgiveness and love.

So these two contradictory gospels precipitated a crisis of loyalty among the Christian disciples, who were torn between the gospel which had led them to love and trust Israel's God and Israel's rabbi's who were urging them to side with the old people of God against all the corruption and injustice that a pagan empire had imposed against all God's people. And after 13 chapters of exalting Christ and grace in the light of everything that came before Jesus and Church, our author finally reminds his readers of the people and relationships who had brought them within hailing distance of Israel's God in the first place.

He writes, "*Remember those who lead you, who spoke to you the word of God and, after considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith.*" The point being that no one holds to true faith, no one takes the gospel to heart as a matter of principle alone. Jesus rules a

kingdom where ongoing, redemptive relationships are the coin of the realm. How will people know we are his disciples? Sound doctrine? Tidy lives? Every thought and feeling in its place and under control? No, we are disciples of Jesus if we show love to one another, Jesus said.

So the part and parcel of learning the gospel aright and taking the truth to heart are the relationships we maintain with the people who lead and teach us. They are to be, our passage teaches, people we know, whose lives and testimonies we can measure and imitate to the extent their *“way of life”* is consistent with the gospel they were given to teach.

The New Testament virtually always speaks of more than one leader in a congregation, I think, because no one disciple possesses all the attributes that the rest of the church should emulate. But the notion taught by Jesus in Matthew and Paul in his letters and here in Hebrews is that our hearts should be open to those who teach us even as we *“consider”* their *“way of life”* with our eyes wide open as well.

“Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever.” our passage goes on to say. *“So don’t be carried away by many and diverse teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by diet and foods which have not benefited those who live by them.”*

The heart of any false super-spirituality has always been technique. Do this in this way and that so often, and God will get your corner and grant you the outcome you want and need. But in fact what strengthens and heals our hearts is for us to face our smallness and wrongness and lean on Christ to sort it through, his way. It’s grace, not mastery that strengthens the heart.

So the siren cry of the first century was for Christians to be kosher and make themselves welcome at the haunting and beautiful holiday meals that Israel would put on for all the sacred holidays. All God’s people ought to stick together and Israel was the place to get that done. To be at table on the occasions Moses ordained, celebrating the feast, sharing in the fellowship the sacrifice expressed was exhilarating and powerful. But our author reminds us that there was a sacrifice that never led to a feast.

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the animals offered for Israel’s sin were taken outside the camp and burned as an expression of how sacred was that sacrifice whose blood found its way to the mercy seat in the Holy of holies. And so Christ was taken far from the old temple precinct to shed his blood and give his life for the sins of people everywhere in every age who could not have been forgiven without him.

The meal we’re about to share is a meatless sacrifice. Bread will stand in for Christ’s body, the fruit of the vine for his blood. And the point is that what we share here are only symbols of realities that have long since passed beyond the veil and into heaven. Christ, wounds and all, is with the Father, forever standing between us and the justice that would have seen us condemned and destroyed. And the fellowship we share is invisible, less a matter of meal and table and more a matter of the heart.

Jesus said in John's gospel, "*He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.*" Because again, relationship is the coin of the realm. What we do here speaks of a give and take that goes on between each of us and Christ, day in and day out...or not.

And so the end of this passage returns to the relationship that exists between disciples and leaders in the church. It says literally, *Be persuaded by, [be open to?] those who lead you and defer to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give account. Let them do this with joy and not grief, for the grief you cause them will be of no benefit to you.*"

As always in the New Testament, the presumption is that gospel teaching and gospel learning goes on redemptive relationships where peoples' hearts are on the line. There are not the abstract, virtual, safe, harmless relationships that take place in settings where teacher and student, leader and disciples know nothing and care little for each other. If joy and grief aren't in play, is it really gospel, is it really discipleship?