

PASTOR'S NOTES. Kingdom Thoughts, part 3.

*"But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard...*

*'Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.'...  
So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

– Matthew 19:30, 20:1-2, 14, 16 (NRSV)

*(I've included just a few verses here, but I encourage you to read the whole passage of Matthew 19:30-20:16.)*

As I have started thinking about this idea of the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven) where the last shall be first, and the leader is a servant, I've wondered what our history might have been like if we had actually lived that over these centuries.

In the year 380, Christianity became the official religion over the areas of the Roman empires. Though Rome fell in the next century, Christianity still dominated western Europe and the eastern empire kept its hold over the Middle East, which was overwhelmingly Christian. But people were less Christian by conscious choice and more because that was what they were born into. It would have been unthinkable for most and dangerous to be different.

In the desert of Saudi Arabia in the year 610 a merchant named Muhammad started having revelations, he believed, of the one true God. It appears that the Arabs of the time were familiar with Jews and Christians, but not the written Bible; only ideas from the common people around them. When I read the writings of Muhammad in the Qu'ran, they seem to me to reflect a reaction both to the idolatry of the Arabs, but also to the corruption of known Jews and Christians. Some Christians of the time believed that Jesus was not fully human and the Virgin Mary was sinless. I suspect that they were also racists; this alone would have prompted Muhammad to find his own way to God apart from them.

Within 20 years, Muhammad's followers ("Muslims" – those who submit to God) became the military power in Arabia. By 642 they controlled the whole Middle East, and by 710 they had stretched all the way across northern Africa and into Spain. From that point to the present, there has been an ongoing relationship in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and neighboring areas between powers that called themselves "Christian" and "Muslim."

This ongoing struggle erupted in war throughout history; it included moments like the Crusades, when Christian fighters marched to recover Jerusalem, with some bloody success in 1099, but suffered defeats later. It included Christians siding with the Mongols when they sacked Baghdad in 1258, and then the Christians suffering serious reversals throughout the 1300s. Until the end of World War I (1918) Islamic nations were major players in the world.

Since that time, though these nations have not held superpower status, the religion of Islam has continued to grow and flourish, faster than Christianity, largely due to birthrates.

Years ago, I was interested in learning more about this faster-growing religion, because I assumed that it or any of the other religions would have some kind of "hook," that is something about it that would attract persons from other faiths. I knew that all of the major religions have an ethic of respect and care for others that allows us to live together. I knew that all of the major religions have interacted and

influenced each other for over a thousand years. But I figured this religion had to offer something more. I was disappointed; I couldn't see anything in the scriptures or the practice of Islam that would lead me to abandon faith in Christ. It appears that most people belong to a religion because they were born into it. When persons do make a switch from one religion to another, it seems to be almost entirely because of a personal connection with someone who truly cares about them and who is an example of faithful, respectful living.

This leads me to wonder if most people in the world even know the differences between religions. For many people of this country, to be Christian is to be American, just as many Iranians would assume their culture is what it is to be Muslim, and Indians to be Hindu, etc. If people in this country don't know what is different about the Christian faith, and they don't see a difference in the Christian people around them, it is no wonder that they are unmotivated to invite others to Christ, and may be quite willing to accept the invitation of a sincere believer of another faith. It is no wonder that in the past nations would become the religion of whoever is in charge.

We proclaim a God who created us to be free. A few religions might have a similar revelation. But no other religion takes it to extreme like us. No other religion claims that God is powerful enough and loving enough to take on a fully human form, or would want to. No other religion proclaims that God's love puts another's life in front of one's own, that is, that God is willing to die for us. For the Apostle Paul, this message was so important that, even though He was a Jew, he didn't think you needed to become a Jew to accept it, but you needed Christ. The Kingdom view of Jesus is this overall picture of God the Father calling a family together for himself where the greatest is willing to be last, or the servant of all. At its conclusion, God is willing to suffer death for it to become a reality. There is nothing like that in other religious faiths, except in some bits and pieces of personal revelations across the world and in the Old Testament.

So what if we actually lived out this Kingdom view of Jesus? You might point out that this was exactly what the American colonies set out to do. They valued freedom because that is how they understood God. But since then many have thought we don't need God to be free. I suppose we could ask a similar question about socialist and communist movements. They claim to look out for the "least of these" – can we do that without God? For me our conception of God is the root of all that we believe and do. Ultimately, ideas of truth, justice, and love fall apart without Him.

So I still wonder how differently things would have turned out if we truly lived out the Kingdom of God the way Jesus has showed us. More importantly, I wonder how different our world becomes if we live out this Kingdom of God now.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' or similar, written in a cursive style.