The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

July 14, 2024

Mark Lewis

I want to again say, thank you so much for allowing me to be part of your service today. Bill Mefford and Marty are dear friends of ours. We got connected first back when we were studying together in the Missiology School at Asbury, going back about 20 years.

Bill and I have just been been pretty much hanging out from a distance ever since then, and so Bill is great.

I mean, as you know, Bill is kind of weird. Bill, I'm not revealing any secrets, am I?

We invited Bill to Denmark some years ago. He also came and spoke at one of our summer camps. And you know, Bill, I mean, this is just an indication of who Bill is. You know he wanted to learn a little Danish, just to be just to come and mix in a little bit. but you know the only phrase that Bill ever learned in Danish was and still is, “I would like to have a manicure.”

Still, I still don't get it, but that's all he knows in Danish.

So anyway. I'm very grateful, Bill.

Thank you so much for allowing me to hang out with you and to be part of this service.

I just want to also let all of you know just how much admiration I have for your ministry.

I was 1st introduced to the to the vision of Gordon and Mary Cosby back in the late 1970’s. At the time I was just starting to get involved in the church, and my pastor, who was actually a mentor for me introduced me to Church of the Saviour and their ministry, and we were all just really enthralled with what they were doing: just the kind of the kind of activism and the social outreach, and all that they were doing in terms of promoting social justice and racial equality and that sort of thing.

I sort of lost touch for a while, but often wondered, particularly in the 80s and 90s what was going on, especially as the emphasis among so many churches and church institutions went towards things like numerical growth and church growth. And you know, that sort of movement really took hold a lot of places. In some ways it always for me was at odds with the approach of the Church of the Saviour, which was not emphasizing numbers, but it was emphasizing authenticity in ministry and in outreach and in contact.

And to me that was the far better way to go. And since then, it's just probably dawned on all of us that the lack of Christian formation – no matter how many we can pack into church buildings and arenas with Christian worship – the lack of formation in Christian character and values (and what we mean in terms of the arc of Christianity towards greater inclusivity and greater love), the lack of that kind of formation is not just indifferent. But it is also dangerous.

And we see that we see that coming to fruition in the rise of things like Christian nationalism and other weird ways. Christianity has been co-opted by agendas that really have nothing to do with Christ.

We applaud and we are truly grateful for movements and expressions of faith like yours that are emphasizing authenticity in faith. Just keep doing what you're doing.

Yeah. So just a way of saying, I've respected you guys for a long time, and I'm sure that you know the Eighth Day ministry is also doing great things, and Bill has told me a bit about what you're up to.

On to the lesson.

I imagine there was some head shaking as the lectionary Gospel was being read. The reason I chose that passage is none other than the fact that I'm currently using once again the common lectionary. And so that just happens to be the gospel lectionary reading for today.

As you know, the lectionary is like the proverbial box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get. And so when Bill asked me to do this, I wasn't really looking ahead, but I decided, well, I'll just use whatever the lectionary is for that day. And when it finally dawned on me that it was the passage from Mark 6 about the beheading of John the Baptist, I had buyers remorse, in a sense. But at the same time, I realized that there are things in that story, that we can draw from. so I thought, well, I'll just accept the fact that this is where we are parachuting into the story today. So we'll take it from there.

I'm gonna read a quote, and maybe you can let me know by raise of hands when I'm through. If you, if you can identify this quote.

It was the best of times.

It was the worst of times.

It was the age of wisdom.

It was the age of foolishness.

It was the epic of belief, it was the epic of incredulity.

It was the season of light.

it was the season of darkness.

it was the spring of hope.

It was the winter of despair.

I'm sure that a lot of you recognize that, as from Charles Dickens’s classic *A Tale of Two Cities* published in 1859. In Dickens classic, he is talking about the tale of the two cities of London and Paris, the disparity, the contrasts between those two cities, when France was engaged in the French Revolution, and how different life was in in those two cities! The great contrast, therefore, a Tale of two cities.

But, as all good stories go, the theme deals with a lot more than just the story itself. It is in many ways symbolic of life in a greater sense.

When we talk about the best of times and the worst of times, we see that playing out in our time as well. I think about the contrasts of life as we experience them. Maybe from day to day.

We think about how it's summertime now and while some people are basking in the sun, there are other people in other parts of the world that are experiencing severe flooding and other kinds of natural disasters and catastrophes. Here in Denmark, it's been raining all summer, so we haven't seen a whole lot of sun. So there's a slight contrast, but not at all the kind of contrast and inequity that we could be talking about in general.

We think about the cycles of life: We have in our church several times during the past year experienced a weekend where there was both a baptism and a funeral. The best of times, and the worst of times or life's beginning, and then life's departure. We experience that in so many other ways, with the disparities of our world,

* where some people are lavishing in wealth, while others are living in abject poverty.
* while some people are experiencing lives of of calm and simplicity, while others are dealing with issues of systemic violence and racism that cause a great deal of stress and unrest.

Some years ago, I remember when you were very engaged with refugee ministries as we are now here in our ministry

Around 2020, 15, or 2016, I got a newspaper clipping from one of our newspapers in Denmark, which in some ways portrayed this contrast better than anything I ever seen. It was a picture from a sunny Greek island, with the turquoise water. They attracted a lot of tourists who were bathing in the water or laying out on the beach. And in the background there were rubber rafts coming in to a nearby port filled with hundreds of refugees that were fleeing the crisis and the catastrophe in Syria at that time.

So we experience lives, contrasts all the time. Personally. Maybe some of us are experiencing good health while others are sick. But we experience them also collectively. In our world, in our communities, where some things are going extremely well while other things are not going so well.

So a tale of 2 Cities. It's the best of times, and the worst of times. We see that playing out all the time in many ways.

I see that same narrative playing out in the Gospel reading for today. Even though the in the foreground we read and hear about the utterly gruesome story of John the Baptist and his fate. But there's also the background to the story, and the background is in in many ways a very different picture. We find in the background the dawning of a new movement.

Jesus was now on the scene. Jesus, who had a revelation of God and God's presence in all things: in all of it in, in all things, God's light, in God's presence, in nature, in the world, in the cosmos, among us, in small things, in living things. Jesus' vision of the kingdom was not about power, not about kings, not about any of that but a vision of a kingdom that was so inclusive. It also meant the kingdom is born and lives within each of us, not just in the cosmos out there, but also the cosmos that is within each of us.

Of course the Bible didn't have a biological language, but if we were to project a little bit our own language onto that, we would say that in some ways Jesus' vision of God would also recognize that the presence of God is etched on the very cells of our being: all of life, all living things. God is there as we breathe God in we are surrounded by, and we are connected by this vision of God.

In this dawning new social and spiritual movement, Jesus also had picked His disciples, his followers, who were then going to embark on an adventure where their movement was getting ready to change everything in the world.

So we find the dawning of something so great. It was in many ways the best of times. something fresh. It was also a time that Jesus with his vision of God, was also clearly able to see through the fakeness of so much of life and so much of the way the world would have been structured in his day. The things about power structures, and even the Church itself, where Jesus was often in conflict with religious leaders. That was not by accident, because Jesus, with His vision of God, was able to recognize how even those with power, and representing the religious structures of his time were no longer constituted to bridges to God, or were actually constituting walls that were preventing God from really breaking in to their worlds and into their lives in the way that Jesus intended.

So Jesus was there to break down walls and to break down barriers and to create greater inclusivity and greater love to levels that maybe in some ways our development of human consciousness has not yet fully, or at least collectively, attained.

So great is that vision that Jesus has brought into this world and that movement set the whole thing in motion.

The foreground to the story, of course, is something quite different. We find here the worst of times: the great prophet John the Baptist. Here he was, speaking truth to power. And as a result, he was cast into Herod’s dungeon, who was afraid of him, afraid of his power, perhaps afraid that in some ways he would undermine his authority. And so that's the way it is with narcissists, especially narcissists that have attained positions of power in our world, a narcissist and a megalomaniac.

Herod also was attracted to John. That's the way it is because when people are truth tellers, when people say things and represent things that are of the light, they're going to be a magnet for anyone, for all people. In some ways all people in some ways are drawn to light. And to this magnetizing force of truth and goodness and beauty, even though they themselves – because of the desire to hang on to their structures and to their own power – are going to resist it at some point.

But yeah, we find Herod Antipas was at least very fascinated by John until Herod, because of his covetous ways, his lust, his whatever it is, got into a situation that he couldn't get out of. In order to save what little honor that he had at least in his world, he had to deliver what he had promised, and that was the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

So we find John shouting out from a dark dungeon words of truth to an unreceptive audience executed at the hands of a narcissistic leader.

The best of times, yes, and the worst of times.

I think we could probably draw some strong parallels also with our work, because grave themes are not just things that apply to whatever circumstances were from that time, but they are also things that apply very much to our world today into our lives.

And I'm sure our minds are all racing around a great deal about: What do we mean by the best of times and the worst of times for us? And again, in some ways it's all going to depend on what perspective we're coming from.

But I'm trying to say things from the vantage point of how I might interpret God's kingdom in our midst. We can say that in many ways it is the best of times, because we find that people are in some ways also waking up, waking up to the reality of what Jesus was talking about with His kingdom.

When Jesus came and started this movement, he was – and I mean this in the most authentic and real way – awake. He was “woke” in the way that we should mean that that term, awake to the reality of life, but also to the promise of goodness and love and beauty, and how the communication of that also can continue to make a difference in our world and for others.

And we find also that a lot of movements in our world are leaning towards that or are moving towards, that. The people are awakening to the reality also of the need for change and to wake up to God's presence in our world.

Of course, a lot of that is because we are facing a whole lot of complexity and a lot of problems in our world. I think people are looking at the fact that a lot of the issues that we are dealing with, for example, climate change and the destruction of our of our ecosystems and whatnot. In order to make changes that will have any kind of lasting effect, we realize that the change also has to take place within the hearts and within the souls of people as well. It can't just be legislation. It has to be a change in perspective, a change in our spiritual direction.

And that is whether we call ourselves Christian or whatever we call ourselves.

But these changes are – we hope and we pray and we believe – that these changes are at least in many corners in the world are taking root. So people are waking up to the need for greater justice, to combat the forces of inequality and oppression in our world.

In our church here we've worked recently with the United Nations 17 goals of addressing things like poverty and gender discrimination and the recognition of differing sexual orientation, love and as well as environmental kinds of kinds of movements and things like that. So we find that that in many, many corners in our world, there's an awareness of the need to address the greater problems and complexities of our world. And we find also that a lot of this is coming from movements like yours.

So it is in some ways the best of times, but we know also that it is in many ways the worst of times, and we know that there's a lot of feeling about what happened yesterday with an assassination attempt. And we also know that just the divisiveness and the conflicting realities, the differing and conflicting worldviews that we find there are coming to a head in many places. It's not just the US. But it's also in other parts of the world, too, where there are also these kinds of polarities, these kinds of contrasts, and these kinds of reactions and overreactions to the differences that people have in our world.

There is also the constant need to stay the course and not just to give ourselves over to the same kind of hostile, dualistic thinking and reacting that many people have always created, creating categories of us and them: we are the righteous, and they are the unrighteous, but in some ways also breaking down those barriers and seeing more issues of causality. Why are people the way they are? And what can we do to address the complexities of their situation?

There are more and more people who are beginning to wake up to these realities, and seeing the ways of dealing with the conflicts of our world, that a0re not going to be solved by demonizing, but by actually understanding, and then taking it from that point.

But anyway, the best of times and the worst of times. And what does it say to us?

It just means that we must stay the course. We are called as followers of Jesus, to follow him to follow the one who started that movement so many years ago, that movement which in some ways is still coming into fruition, the movement that has not yet been realized.

We, as people, must continue to grow in awareness, in movements towards greater inclusivity, greater love, greater acceptance, greater compassion.

But we also recognize that when we stand for something like this, we can't always expect to be part of the majority. Sometimes to be the vanguards of goodness, truth and beauty means that that message and that responsibility is also entrusted to the few for safekeeping.

And that is the way that it has always been throughout Church history; we see from the beginning. The Christian movement was small within the Roman Empire, but yet they made an impact because of their compassion for the poor and those who were coming in with all the needs there to empowering women, and giving voice and giving recognition, and giving place to all people to share in that agape fellowship, where there was love for all, no matter of their station in life.

And as the church became co-opted by the Roman Empire as Constantine struck a bargain with the Church, where the Church would then become again the guardian of whatever cultural norms, the Roman Empire embodied at that time.

Then different movements had to emerge again to safeguard the true authenticity of Christian life, and often this was done by the deserts fathers and mothers, who then were there to live out authentic Christian lives with character formation and value formation while living in the desert, among other places. And this goes on and on throughout history.

While there were inquisitions and crusades, there were also movements that declared that this is not representative of Jesus, and that movement that originally started this whole thing.

And now in our day today, we find that the Black Church which gave rise to the Civil Rights movement, and in days like today, where it's movements like yours, like Eighth Day ministry and fellowship, which is also is preserving and promoting the authenticity in faith.

So that is in its way my courage. I guess the message is, there are good times and bad times, and they're always going to coexist.

The main thing is whether we are experiencing the freshness of the movement, or whether we consider ourselves to be among the voices that are entrapped in Herod's dungeon, crying out into the night for a so-called humorless audience. No matter what our lot is in life, our call is the same, to stay the course, to be true to your call and to your vision, and to allow God to work through you the things that only God can do.

Amen.