

Is It Now the Time?

I have always wondered at the disciples question of Jesus recorded in the passage we have before us from Luke's sequel known as Acts: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Both the end of Luke's gospel and the opening chapter of Acts describe the last moments the risen Jesus spends with his eleven selected disciples. Luke 24:44-53 narrates that Jesus is with them as they are together in Jerusalem while he explains "everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." This opening of the scripture to them told them "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations beginning from Jerusalem"; they were to be his witnesses about "these things." In this passage, the disciples are told to return from Bethany to Jerusalem and wait there for the arrival of the Holy Spirit before beginning to fulfill the mission he has just given them. Christ then blesses them as he ascends into heaven. There is no mention of them questioning Christ about the future. They worship him, return to Jerusalem with great joy spending the waiting time in the temple blessing God. Luke's gospel ends on the day of the resurrection...which is very different from the image which opens Acts. There the author is clear that he writes about the Ascension occurring in a very different timeframe. The risen Christ has spent forty days giving instructions to the Apostles he has chosen. These instructions are about the kingdom of God, just as Jesus' ministry among them had been. Again, at this gathering the risen Christ tells them to return to Jerusalem and wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. However, here we have reported a question that the disciples ask: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" It seems that these chosen Apostles' have still not separated the nation state of Israel from the kingdom and reign of God which includes all nations. The risen Christ responds this way: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." They are again told that they will be witnesses to what he has told them...not only in Jerusalem where they will wait, but also "in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." This final pronouncement signals the ascension and they watch as he disappears into the cloud. But here they do not immediately leave, but stand staring up at the sky until suddenly two men in white robes stand by them. They, just as the two men seen by the women in the empty tomb have a message to give: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." As much as we might shake our heads at the disciples continued confusion about what God wants them to do, the question that is asked is one we too frequently skip over in our rush to wonder at the changes brought about by the Holy Spirit's arrival. The question: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" The response the risen Christ gives that this is not something they are to know does not distract from the importance of the question or the serious issue behind it. Jesus had consistently proclaimed the kingdom of God is at hand, the

promised reign God is about to break into history so this is a central issue for the disciples (including us). Jesus had demonstrated God's power of healing and restoration as he moved among them...proclaiming "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has proclaimed me to bring good news to the poor". Jesus preached liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed and his actions illustrated these things. The vision given by the prophets described people returning to their homeland to find peace and the freedom to worship God seeing Jerusalem as a center of peace and justice for all nations; swords would be beaten into plowshares and spears would become pruning hooks. Jesus lived out this vision during his ministry through his healing and restoration of community, through his crossing of boundaries and interactions will all. The vision he demonstrated was one of justice and peace for all peoples, of redemption and liberation. When the disciples ask this question of Christ they were giving voice to their desire for that vision to become real. They had witnessed Jesus' rejection and brutal death after proclaiming the vision, but God had raised him from the dead, had vindicated the vision, so Jesus had been right that the kingdom was at hand; but when? From their perspective, it seemed reasonable to be given a date upon which they could depend. But the response they receive is that the time is not theirs to know. For many centuries there have been many folks preoccupied with the answer to that question; seeking to establish a timetable for God's actions when those who first asked the question were plainly told it was not something they could know...it was God's authority and timing known only to God. Evidently Christ did not think they were asking the right question because he gave them actions to do...they were to continue his mission in the present. They were to carry the vision to the "ends of the earth" as his witnesses, not to worry about the timing, about the when the vision would become reality. What happens when the expectation of the vision's fulfillment is moved to the future, or perhaps elevated into something that happens in heaven? Serious consequences result in the way we understand Christ's message to which we are the witnesses. The main task becomes telling people about the "heavenly kingdom" which Jesus told us about and whose life and ministry makes it possible for to enter. If this is our message, we don't have to concern ourselves with the realities of this world...we don't have to worry about the conditions of the poor, of those oppressed, of those suffering from injustices in the systems which exist in this world. We don't have to concern ourselves with working to make changes in those things, just wait for a reward for our faithful telling of the message. The message as Jesus gave it was an offer of hope and a promise: A promise that God's will and vision could come and be lived here. Remember that phrase we lift in prayer every Sunday? The one asking God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven? Unfortunately we often define the doing of God's will as following the commandments about doing good and the commission to tell others about heaven. So what is the right question? Perhaps it is how do we work to make the promise of God's reign coming to earth, breaking in and existing in the here and now? Accepting that the promise God made and Jesus proclaimed applies to the here and now realities of life on earth. Often when we

understand the message as a personal one to us instead of a plan for the whole world, we can delegate it to the spiritual dimension of people. This internalizes the message and changes Jesus' promise to the poor and the hungry to one made to those spiritually poor and spiritually hungry. Becoming a new creation is then the salvation of the soul. This removes pain from the reality of Jesus' vision for the world being unfulfilled because the vision is now only concerned with the individual. What is the right question for us? Do we spend our time like those first disciples "gazing up toward heaven" so we don't actually have to do as we have been asked? Those two robed figures reminded the disciples that they had no reason to stand there looking up. Christ had risen. Christ would come again. They should get busy doing what he had told them to do...in all the places of the world...they should be living into the creation of the new world which would bring God's kingdom into the here and now. And as Acts continues describing their actions as they are sent into the world, they got the message...bringing God's vision with them as they went...crossing boundaries and showing God's love and acceptance everywhere. We have the same mission as we wait for Christ's return, celebrating the good news that we have been given that God's vision includes abundant life for all and we can participate in the establishment of that vision as reality among us. So, yes, now is the time for us to proclaim what Jesus proclaimed: the kingdom of God is at hand if we follow the teachings given to us to love and care for all those God' loves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.