

Where is the Kingdom of God?

“Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come....” (2 Thes. 2:1)

In this passage from the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, it would seem that St. Paul is doing his best to reassure his congregation that the second coming of Our Lord is not as imminent as they think. One gets the impression that perhaps a good number of the faithful in Thessalonica were all excited and worked up over this prospect of Our Lord’s return. And it is unlikely that something like that could have happened unless St. Paul had, in fact, preached to the Thessalonians very forcefully, perhaps very graphically, about the second coming of Our Lord. Obviously, this was an important doctrine that St. Paul thought had to be stressed in teaching his new converts about Christ and His Kingdom. And so we might wonder why St. Paul considered this teaching so important, why he would place such a great emphasis upon it.

In recent months I have been reading a number of things on the messianic expectations of the Jews at the time of Christ. There was, in fact, a general expectation around the time of Our Lord that God would once again intervene in the history of His people by sending the

Messiah. There was something in the air, a tension, an expectation. And so given this expectation, one might wonder why many of the Jews failed to recognize Christ as the Messiah when He did come. In this regard, one of the

authors whom I was reading points out that, in fact, if you look at the Jews not only at the time of Christ, but all down the centuries since Christ’s coming, they have been very consistent in the reason they give for not accepting Christ as the Messiah. And their reason simply comes down to this: When the Messiah comes we know that he will establish his messianic kingdom and he will inaugurate the messianic age — but we don’t see any signs of the kingdom.

Where is the kingdom that your Messiah was supposed to bring? We know from the prophecies of the Old Testament that the messianic kingdom is obviously supposed to be characterized by a time of peace and prosperity, by the establishment of justice and the elimination of God’s enemies. But we don’t see any of this. In short, they say that Jesus is not the Messiah because he failed to bring the messianic kingdom that was foretold in the Prophets of the Old Testament.



Coronation of Mary by Fra Angelico

It would seem that this basic objection to the messianic claims of Christ is one that not only ancient and modern Jews make, but also a good part of the modern world as well. They basically say to us: “You claim that Christ came to bring us redemption. But just look at the 2000 years of history since His coming, with all the obvious evil and suffering in the world, evil and suffering that was caused even by those who professed to be followers of Christ. If Christ brought us redemption, where are the signs of the redemption.”

I believe there are many different ways in which we could reply to this objection. For one thing, I believe that if anyone with an open mind and honest heart were to do a serious study of the lives of the Christian saints all down the centuries they would find clear signs of the presence of the kingdom of God. God’s kingdom exists wherever God is reigning as King, and He reigns above all in the hearts of His saints. How can anyone explain how these saints lived and what they accomplished without Christ’s redemption? I also believe that we take for granted the many great benefits and blessings that Christian civilization has brought to the world and which show the influence that Christ and His teaching have had on mankind. The influence of Christ can be found in many different spheres of life: in education, in health care, in the arts and in law. As a general rule, modern secular society does not wish to acknowledge the source or fount from which these many benefits have come.

But the one answer to this objection that I would like to emphasize and highlight now is one that can be found in the Fathers of the

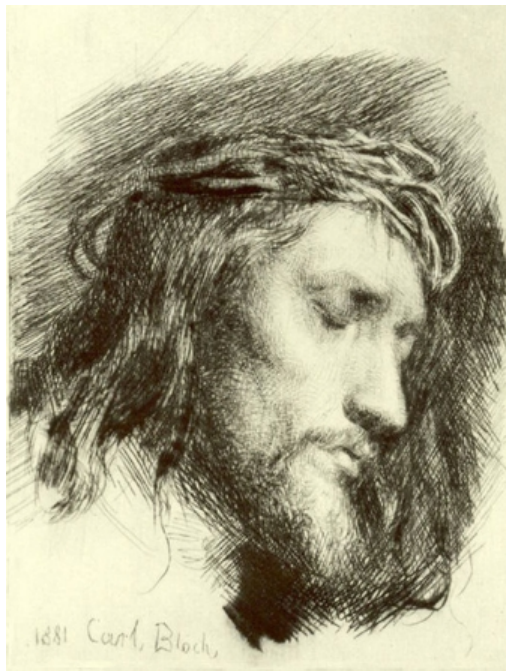
Church and in their way of understanding the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and the messianic age. What some of the Fathers point out is that when we look at

the messianic prophecies, we have to understand that some of them refer to the Messiah’s first coming, while others refer to His second and definitive coming. The Scriptures proclaim a first coming of the Messiah in which He is lowly and meek, in which He is the suffering servant who gives His life for the salvation of all: “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted”(Is. 53:3-4).

But Scripture also proclaims a victorious Messiah who puts an end to

all injustice and brings peace on earth; a Messiah who comes with great power and glory — and these are the prophecies that Christ will fulfill at His second coming, at the time when the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them....”(Is. 11:6).

One of the Fathers of the Church points out that the Jews are making a mistake because they are only paying attention to the prophecies that foretell the second coming of the Messiah. They were so focused on the clearer prophecies that spoke of the glories and the victorious reign of the Messiah and his kingdom, that they failed to see or ignored the prophecies that speak of His first coming in lowliness and humility.



Portrait of Christ by Carl Bloch

The Scriptures proclaim a first coming of the Messiah in which He is lowly and meek, in which He is the suffering servant who gives His life for the salvation of all.

They failed to recognize this first coming of the Messiah that was also proclaimed by the prophets because of the greater obscurity of these prophecies and because they thought that only a glorious and triumphant coming would be worthy of God's Messiah. Or in other words, they were inclined to judge God and His plan by human standards and human reasonings rather than submitting in faith to the ways of God. All of this makes manifest the centrality of faith. When God revealed Himself in His Incarnate Son, He didn't do it in such a way as to remove every shadow of doubt. He did not come with such an overwhelming display of power that no one could resist believing that it was He. There still remains the need for us to trust God, to search for Him with love, to listen interiorly to His truth. If we are to let God be God then we can not dictate to Him how He

must make Himself known and how He is supposed to act when He comes to redeem us. This would be to put ourselves in the place of God.

Furthermore, with all this we can perhaps see why it is that St. Paul in teaching the first Christians about this Jewish Messiah who has come and redeemed our world, placed such a forceful emphasis on His second coming as well. It is important to realize that the Messiah has yet come to finish His work and inaugurate the final messianic kingdom, at which time *all* the prophecies will be fulfilled. He will return in glory and victorious over all His enemies. Those who refuse to recognize Christ because they do not see His kingdom must realize that those who believe in Him still pray every day: "Thy kingdom come." ✠