

WHO'S MINDING THE STORE?

by Ray C. Stedman

World events today seem to crowd in upon us. Tragedy, catastrophe and crisis follow hard on the heels of one another. Just when we had got the hostages back from Iran, the Russians threatened to invade Poland; and while that was still a possibility, the President was attacked. Crises seem to descend upon us without any let-up. Crime is turning our cities into ghettos of fear and anger. Pornography and obscenity are flung at us by the media. We are shocked by the stories of the murder and the sexual abuse of children. Here in the Bay Area, divorces now outnumber marriages. Inflation robs us all. Life seems to be growing increasingly complex and frightening. No wonder many people are asking, "Is anyone in charge? Who's minding the store? Is there any power beyond our own feeble efforts that can control the events of today?"

It may comfort you to know that we are not the first generation to ask that question. In fact, the Apostle John himself may very well have asked it in the 1st century. John was the last of the apostles. By the time he had reached eighty years of age, all the other apostles had been martyred for the cause of Christ. When the Emperor Domitian came to the throne of Rome, John was exiled to Patmos, a little barren island in the middle of the Aegean Sea. He thought he was doomed to live out his days there, without ever again being allowed to preach, or travel, or minister. Those were the days when Christians were being persecuted all throughout the empire. They were being thrown to the lions; they were being bound up in animal skins and thrown into the sea; they were being ground up in millstones; they were being used as torches to light public gatherings. Domitian had ordered that Christians had to make a public stand as to whether they would say, "Jesus is Lord," or, "Caesar is Lord."

Now, in the midst of that outbreak of persecution, John was walking in loneliness on his little island, when suddenly, as he tells us in the book of Revelation, he saw a vision of Jesus. Although it had been sixty years since he had seen Jesus in the flesh, John knew who he was. Yet Jesus was strangely different. John describes him as "clothed with a long robe and a golden girdle, his head and his hair as white as snow, his voice like the sound of many waters, his face shining with all the strength of the sun in its glory," {cf, Rev 1:13-15}. John says in Chapter 1, Verse 17:

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." {Rev 1:17-18 RSV}

Those are wonderful words of reassurance to us who have to live in a frightening time in our own lives. Let us consider them this Easter morning as being spoken to us by the risen Lord, as they were spoken to John on that day of world trouble in the 1st century.

Jesus said, first, "Fear not. Don't be afraid." I think this is what we need to hear in these days when many Christians are very much afraid. Surely nothing is less glorifying to God than a fearful Christian. Jesus was always saying, "Fear not," to his frightened disciples. The Gospels record that every time they were in trouble, they expressed themselves in manifestations of fear, anxiety, worry, and panic, but the Lord always came along at the right moment and said, "Fear not," as he says here to John.

Now what Jesus meant was, first, "Don't be afraid of me," because John was afraid. Seeing the Lord Jesus risen and glorified was a frightening sight. All the prophets and apostles and saints who have seen God in glory have always fallen down in fear and trembling before him. But Jesus reassures John, saying, "Don't be afraid." By this he means that God is our friend, not our enemy; he is for us, not against us. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" {Rom 8:31}. The writer of Hebrews puts it, "If God be for us, what can man do unto us for he has said, 'I will never ever, never ever leave thee nor forsake

thee'," {Heb 13:5 KJV}. Now that is the great promise which Jesus makes here to John.

Jesus says there are two reasons why we are not to be afraid:

First, he says, "I am the first and the last, and the living one." That means that he is at the beginning and at the end of everything in everybody's life, and the "living one" all the way in between. He is always with us. That is the import of that verse I just quoted from Hebrews. There the writer puts it as strongly as it is possible to put it in the Greek language. He repeats the negative four different times so that we might be reassured that we are never left alone; that all the circumstances in the life of each one who believes in Jesus come from him and end with him and that he accompanies us all the way through. "I am the first and the last. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the A and the Z of life. I am the beginning and the ending and the living one." The present tense is used all the way through. Jesus is the One who goes with us through everything.

How many of the saints have been helped from time to time by remembering that, in the midst of their troubles, the Lord was with them!

I have always been a lover of the life of Hudson Taylor, that doughty young Englishman who went out to China as a missionary. There he discovered that all the work of gospel preaching was going on in the coastal cities, while nobody was touching the vast interior of that country. So, all alone, Hudson Taylor went into the interior of China. He dressed as a Chinese, let his hair grow and braided it into a queue (as the Chinese did at that time). He learned the language, and began to preach the gospel, founding the great mission called, The China Inland Mission, (now known as Overseas Missionary Fellowship). The church in China, which has still flourished during the time of persecution under the Communists, is largely the church which was formed under the ministry of Hudson Taylor.

In the early years of this century, when Hudson Taylor was an old man, the Boxer Rebellion broke out in China. It was a terrible time of persecution of Christians. The local warlords tried to stamp out everything foreign, and, as they viewed Christianity as a foreign faith, hundreds of native Christians were put to death. (Some of the missionaries were martyred too. John and Betty Stamm were two who were martyred at that time.) When the news came to Hudson Taylor that attacks were being made upon his beloved churches, it was a very painful time for him. One day there came a particularly disturbing account of a slaughter among the Christians. When his fellow workers learned that he had heard about this, they wondered how he was taking it, so one of them went up to his house to see how he was doing. As he came up the walk, he heard the old man singing to himself that well-known hymn,

Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart.
Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee, and Thy beauty fills my soul,
For by Thy transforming power, Thou hast made me whole.

It has been the comfort of saints all through the centuries to know that Jesus is with us. That is what he promised us. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" {cf, Mark 16:15 RSV}, he said, "and, lo, I am with you even unto the end of the age," {cf, Matt 28:20 KJV}. He tells us that, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," {Matt 18:20}.

During the 16th century, when the Scottish Covenantors were being scattered by the persecution of the church, one congregation was told by its pastor that they had to flee and hide. But he said these words to them,

"If there be one of you, He will be the second; and if there be two of you, He will be the third, and you will never lack for company."

That promise has undergirded and sustained the faith of millions of people who, in sorrow or disappointment or heartache or problem or pressure, felt that everyone had left them. Then they realized they were not alone; the Lord was with them.

That is why Paul can say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" {Rom 8:31 KJV}. In the closing words

of Romans 8, Paul asks the question,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Rom 8:35-37 {RSV})

Those reassuring words are intended to comfort those who feel alone, and who want somebody to stand with them through a time of trouble. We look to each other for that, but oftentimes human beings fail. But Jesus will not fail. This is his word to us, "Fear not for I am the first and the last and the living one."

That is not all, however. These words are expanded with this statement:

"I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." {Rev 1:18b RSV}

This is the message of Easter. Jesus himself said, "because I live you shall live also," {cf, John 14:19b}. That removes the sting of death, and takes care of the future as well. One of these days you and I are going to lose everything we have, but we will lose nothing that we have become in Christ. The only thing we can take with us is what we are in him. No enemy remains that he has not already conquered. That is why he says. "I hold the keys of Death and Hades."

Death, of course, is the end of life. What Jesus is saying in that statement is, "There can come no end to those who trust in me unless I allow it."

One Christian put it this way, "I am immortal until my work is done."

I believe that, but I do not think it gives me any warrant to go jumping off buildings or running out into traffic. Jesus himself refused to jump off the pinnacle of the temple when tempted of the devil. He said, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord your God," {Luke 4:12b KJV}. Jesus holds the keys of death, and death cannot strike until he allows it.

And Jesus holds the keys of Hades. (That is the life to come. In the Scripture it is the equivalent of the Old Testament Sheol, life beyond the grave.) Jesus said that he holds those keys also. "No man can come to the Father but by me" {cf, John 14:6}, he said. There is no hope of eternal life apart from him.

I have always loved those words in John 5:24:

"Verily, verily I say to you, he that hears my word and believes on him that sent me, has eternal life and shall not come into judgment but is passed from death to life."

Many a dying Christian has pillowed his head on that promise.

This past week a dear friend of mine, the wife of one of my closest friends, went to be with the Lord. She had a difficult death, but when I received the news that she was gone, I confess I envied her, because Jesus has so removed the fear of death that those who trust in him can only look forward to the future, and glory in that which is to come.

I have the privilege oftentimes of speaking to groups of young people. I love to speak to them and to teach the Word to them, because they are so eager and receptive, usually. As I look out upon their alert faces, their vigorous bodies, and their handsome good looks, I know that they are looking back at me, seeing this old white-haired man. They think I envy them, but I don't. They think I want to be young again because this world worships youth, but I don't. I have no desire to go back to the perturbations, the troubles, the trials, and the acne of youth! No, I am looking forward to what is coming. "The best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made."

There are a dozen passages in Scripture that try to describe, in general terms, what is waiting beyond. They so excite my imagination at times as I read them that I can hardly wait -- "To depart and to be with Christ is far better," {cf, Phil 1:23}.

With these words to John, then, Jesus has put a sun in our sky that will never set, a light on our face that can handle the ravages of death, so that we can look past it to the glory that lies beyond. No wonder, therefore, that these words come to us across the centuries, across the grave, beyond life, to tell us, "Don't be afraid of what you have to go through in life, of the trials and troubles that come. They are not designed to hurt you, but to help you." The Word of God everywhere says that. These trials are under the control of One who is keeping them from being too much to bear. He has promised us that. There is Someone in charge -- Someone is minding the store -- so we do not need to be afraid. "Fear not for I am with you."

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