
A NEW REALITY

BY MICHAEL CARD

Theologians have used words like “the now and the not yet,” or “partiality and fullness” to describe our present situation, namely that you and I live between the worlds of Jesus’ first and second Coming, between the reality of the past fulfilled and a new, hoped for reality.

By faith we cling to the truth that He *has* come. We read the Old Testament and see clearly the promises that were made. We read the New and find each of those promises perfectly fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

At other moments we jump to the end, we read of the “End Times.” Of the flashing instant when He will return, as He promised He would someday. Mostly, we like to argue about the details of its’ fulfillment and waste our precious time and breath when we should simply make ourselves ready by obediently watching and waiting for it, as He said we should. (Mk.13:37)

But those are merely the book ends, aren’t they? And between those important events lies the daily-ness of life, yours and mine. We can read the gospels at the level of the imagination and “be there” with Jesus and the Twelve on the road of perhaps in the Temple. Or we can read books like Revelation and be ready to jump out of the way when we see the seven horsemen coming our way. But once again I ask, what about the “Now?”

The disciples were caught up in the same dilemma, it seems to me. They were constantly looking forward to a glorious climax in Jerusalem. Of crowns and thrones for Jesus and themselves. But it was the sacrament of the present moment, of their precious time together with Jesus that they often seem to have wasted. Like us, they lived between past promises fulfilled and future hope of glory. No one more than Peter lived in this confusing place. How unfortunate it is to miss the present moment, since that is the only place you and I (or Peter) can meet with Jesus and experience this new reality He has come to show us. As that moment flashes past us all, we are caught up in yet another tension; between the present and the new reality. Peter’s time with Jesus provides a wonderful window into this dilemma.

He was a realist, after all, and Jesus will never once condemn Simon or any of the disciples for looking at the reality of the situation. Phillip is not condemned for pointing out the simple fact that there is no way approximately fifteen thousand people can be fed with two loaves and three sardines.(Jn.6) Thomas is not really castigated for the demand he makes to see some proof. (Jn.20:26) Martha and Mary receive no correction from Jesus for not being able to perceive that there is still another possible outcome to the death of their brother

which they were incapable of even hoping for. (Jn.11) The hunger of the thousands was the reality, as real as our own hunger continues to be. The deaths of Jesus and his friend Lazarus were the reality, as the prospect of your death and mine continue to be.

One of the best illustrations of what I am talking about from the parable of Simon Peter’s life is the time he walked on the water. Simon was surrounded by reality, too much reality! There was the windstorm in which he and the disciples were caught up. (This was a very different situation than the earlier demonic storm that almost swamped the boat (Mk.4:35ff).) After he steps out onto the water and makes his way to Jesus there is the very real force of gravity that is pulling him towards the bottom of the cold lake. But in between those bookends, there is the new reality of walking on the water, and that moment is a parable of our present situation.

After all, the miracle is happening, is it not? Peter is doing what no one (besides Jesus) has ever done. (Elisha once made an ax head float (2Ki.6:5) but in comparison... big deal!) Peter has stepped out onto and into a new reality where, alongside the old reality of gravity, new possibilities have been born. The “not yet” has entered partially into the “now.” And you and I must live on this same razors edge.

Yes, death remains a reality, as real as the smell coming from Lazarus’ tomb. But there lives, now in this present moment, a new reality where the dead can live again. Yes, handicaps remain a painful part of this fallen reality we all inhabit. But, because of the Coming of Jesus, infused into this contorted time is the very real possibility for the lame to “leap like deer.”

Thomas More was once meeting with a leader in the church when the discussion drifted to the topic of Peter and what the churchman saw as a new reality. As they discussed the first healing in the temple (Acts 3:1-10), the religious leader told Thomas, “See, the Church need no longer say, ‘silver and gold have I none,’” meaning that the church had become wealthy.

“Yes, indeed,” Thomas More replied, “but neither can it now say, ‘Arise and walk.’”

That is precisely our problem today as we struggle to know the new reality. We have become rich, so rich in fact that we feel we don’t really need God to enter into the sacrament of the present moment. We can handle it.

Likewise, we feel we have become so wise. We have our theological categories and positions, our denominations and creeds. We can deal with the confusion and disappointments of the old reality, thank you very much, God.

Not until we learn to find the face in the storm, until we understand that the only way out is to reach up for the hand He offers, only then will we make that first step onto the new reality. Not until we abandon our false sense of self sufficiency and the delusion that we can understand and explain it all away will we really start to see with new eyes the new reality where the blind really do see and the deaf really do hear. Meanwhile, until the grace comes to make that moment happen, we will be left with smell of Lazarus’ tomb in our noses and the oppressive weight of the very force of gravity holding us down.

