

[Spirituality](#)

[Pencil Preaching](#)



by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

November 11, 2020

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)



The coming of the Kingdom of God cannot be observed” (Luke 17:20).

Philemon 7-20; Luke 17:20-25

Today’s first reading from St. Paul’s Letter to Philemon is both a private pastoral appeal and a remarkable statement revealing just how revolutionary the Gospel was for first century believers. Paul writes to a man he had converted in Colossae, the owner of a runaway slave who later joined Paul as his helper. The names Philemon (loving) and Onesimus (useful) suggest that Paul’s private letter had become a broader statement in circulation on the question of slavery.

Paul uses all his powers of persuasion to get Philemon to forgive Onesimus and take him back into his household, no longer a slave but his brother in Christ. It was a life or death appeal, since escape was punishable by death in order to set an example for other slaves thinking of running away. Ancient Rome and Greece both used slave labor to build and serve their cultured worlds. One of their greatest fears was a widespread slave revolt like the one Spartacus inspired, which was put down in 71 BCE, when 6,000 survivors were crucified along the Appian Way as a warning.

“Philemon” is one of Paul’s authentic letters, yet it receded in importance and its message did not change a brutal practice that was even supported using the Bible well into the 19th Century, with racist reverberations in world culture today, one of

the most glaring anomalies in the history of Christianity.

In today's Gospel, Jesus addresses the question of when the Kingdom of God is to appear. It is not a visible breakthrough or announced event but an ongoing wave of conversion overtaking each generation from within. Jesus compares it to lightning flashing across the entire horizon, lighting up the night sky with awesome and foreboding power. So will judgment come upon the world when it least expects it, like a thief in the night, another image Jesus uses.

What is most shocking is the revelation that will judge history. The world of hierarchies of wealth and power, privileged societies built on the servile labor and suffering of the majority, what Liberation theologians have named "the crucified of history," will be turned upside down. What they and the "nations" will realize in a lightning flash of accountability is that the Master of the Universe took his place among the poor, enslaved, neglected and abused members of the human community, surrendering all divine prerogatives and accepting death on a cross in order to reveal that the hidden glory of God is Absolute Love.

Christian eschatology, "last things," holds accountability as essential for history. The church proclaims Jesus' suffering and death as redemptive, the inauguration of the new Creation. Jesus' resurrection confirms God's mercy for a sinful world and promises a Beloved Community as our destiny. How and when judgment will come for us is unknown, but what we do know is that love is the first Commandment and that when we love one another, God's Kingdom is already here.

Advertisement