

Are We There Yet?

When I started thinking about this time today many weeks ago, and the reasons for this will become clear in a few moments, I began to think about phrases that once were a common part of our culture that we, at least I, don't hear any more.

You are aware that we have reached the point in our culture where when you see that the Christmas decorations are up and Christmas items are out for sale it can mean only one thing: Thanksgiving is not far behind. This seems to happen earlier every year.

Perhaps this is the reason that a phrase I used to hear in my childhood, often applied by my parents to me and my not doing things as quickly as they desired, was, "William, you are as slow as Christmas."

"As slow as Christmas." Perhaps because the rate of acceleration in which we live nothing seems as slow as once it did.

Another idiom applied to lack of speed was to say that someone was "As slow as molasses." I think we don't use or hear that because molasses is not the staple in the American diet as it was years ago.

I began to think of other phrases that once people said or heard frequently but no more:

"Don't forget to fill the ice trays."

"Would you quit slamming the screen door."

"Don't forget to wind the clock before you go to bed."

"There's a dollar in my purse. Get five gallons of gas when you go to town."

“When you take your driving test, don’t forget to signal each turn. Left arm straight out the window for a left turn; left arm up for a right turn; left arm straight down when you are going to stop.”

“Turn the TV antenna, the reception is bad.”

“I’m going to order a new set of Encyclopedia Britannica for the kids, the old set will soon be outdated.”

“Number please.” (Our first phone number was 401-M)

“I’ve run out of film for my camera.”

The sound of baseball cards in the bicycle spokes.

“Clean your plate, there are children who are starving in China.”

You don’t hear any of these any more.

But there is one phrase that my children used to make and our grandchildren used to make that children still do. Actually, I wasn’t sure of this so I sent out my crack research team to check. The phrase is, when on car trips most young children say sooner or later, “Are we there yet?” The parents I asked said that their children still did unless they shoved a distracting device into their hands which turned their minds to mush.

Are we there yet?

Well, in one way of looking at things we are.

Today we have reached the end of my going through the Gospel of Thomas verse by verse and using the teachings found in the Gospel of Thomas as a diving platform to jump from into my and our, hopefully, growing understanding of what it means to be a person of faith in this time and what it means in this time to be a person of faith.

Those are two different constructs.

What does it mean to be a person of faith? Our understandings of this are things that need to be growing. Growing psycho-spiritually is our primary purpose here. Hanging out with someone who has the same psycho-spiritual understandings today as they had six months ago is like hanging out with someone who hasn't changed clothes in six months.

And, what about the context, the time, in which we live? We don't want to be like that frog in a pot of water where the temperature is gradually rising and we fail to notice what our culture is doing to us, to our minds, to our relationships.

For people who are interested in Jesus and the origins of Christianity, the Gospel of Thomas is the most important manuscript discovery ever made to date. Over the years now that I have spent reading about this collection of sayings, I have come to believe that, in addition to the synoptic Gospels, Thomas is the most historically valuable source of Jesus teachings that we have.

Robert Wilson in "Studies in the Gospel of Thomas" says, "Its origin and development may be obscure, the processes of its composition present many problems, even the interpretation of some of the sayings may at times be difficult; the final solution of these and other problems lies still in the future. But that the discovery of this document is an event of the first importance there can be no doubt." (1960)

The Gospel of Thomas, discovered the same year we dropped the first atomic bomb, is in Coptic. Though many of the teachings attributed to Jesus in Thomas can also be found in the Christian Testament, they present a very different view of religion and the nature of humanity.

I want to read to you a passage by Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar. This is taken from "The Five Gospels."

"The Gospel of Thomas has proved to be a gold mine of comparative material and new information. Thomas has forty-seven parallels, to Mark, forty parallels to Q, seventeen to Matthew, four to Luke, and five to John. These numbers include

sayings that had been counted twice. About sixty-five sayings or parts of sayings are unique to Thomas. (Complex sayings in Thomas, as in the other gospels, are often made up of more than one saying, so that the total number of individual items in Thomas exceeds one hundred and fourteen.) These materials, which many scholars take to represent a tradition quite independent of the other gospels, provide what scientists call ‘a control group’ for the analysis of sayings and parables that appear in other gospels.”

In late 1945 an Egyptian peasant rode his camel to the base of a cliff. Hoping to find fertilizer to sell in the nearby village of Nag Hammadi, what he found instead was a large sealed pottery jar. He feared it might contain a genie that would haunt or attack him. He hoped it might contain a treasure. (This information is taken from Stevan Davies book on the Gospel of Thomas.) Gathering his courage, he smashed open the jar and discovered a collection of twelve old books. Suspecting they might be of value, he kept them for a while and then sold them for a small sum.

The writings gradually came into the hands of scholars in Cairo, Europe and America. Today they are known as the Nag Hammadi library, a collection that is generally considered by scholars to be perhaps the most important archaeological discovery of the twentieth century.

The twelve books contain fifty-two different texts, forty of which were previously unknown to scholarship.

Scholars knew of the existence of the Gospel of Thomas before its discovery because it was mentioned in writings of one of the church leaders from the third century. Fragments of it had been found in Greek in the nineteenth century. The found manuscript had been translated from Greek into Coptic.

The way the scholars decided to number, or count, the sayings was simple. Every time the phrase, “Jesus said” appears, that was considered the beginning of a new teaching. By this method there are 114 sayings of Jesus in Thomas.

Actually the phrase used throughout Thomas is “Yeshua said,”

The sayings, except for the first three and the last three, are in no particular order. There is a fair amount of repetition, especially toward the end. It is about as primitive a text as one could hope for - which is another reason to claim its authenticity and its early age. It seems most likely that the sayings were transcribed by a scribe on a particular occasion from the word-of-mouth recitations by some people who were trying to remember what they could of what Jesus reportedly had said.

It is my personal opinion, and scholarship is divided about this, that Thomas is an independent collection of sayings and reflects a new source for the teachings of Jesus.

The reason I have decided for the independence of Thomas is because it contains none of the themes that became important in the early movement of what became Christianity. There is no emphasis of the birth or the death of Jesus. In Thomas Jesus is not an earth-invading miracle worker who skedaddles as soon as he is done. Thomas came into existence before these themes were developed.

I have found the time I have spent with the Gospel of Thomas helpful in my own spiritual growth and I hope you have as well. Since we are saying goodbye to it, I wanted to give you one more take on what the current scholarship about it is.

So, when it comes to going through the Gospel of Thomas, the answer to the question, "Are we there yet?" Is "Yes."

The question, "Are we there yet?" is not a new one. You see a version of it in the teaching we are looking at today.

Here it is:

His students asked him,

"On what day
will the kingdom
arrive?"

“Its coming cannot be perceived
from the outside,” he said.

“You cannot say,
‘Look, it’s over there,’ or
‘No, here it is.’

The Father’s realm
is spreading out
across the face of the earth,
and humanity is not able
to perceive it.”

This is the last saying in the Gospel of Thomas.

Actually, there is one more but it was, according to 100% of the scholars who have labored over Thomas, added later. Besides, it is about the Sacred Feminine and I have asked a female colleague to come and at some later day and present about it. It’s presumptuous for a male to speak knowingly about the feminine at all.

In this teaching we are challenged one final time to abandon our stubborn effort to place God’s kingdom, rule, reign - or whatever word you choose to describe it - somewhere else or in some other time. I currently say that it is where we give ourselves over to two realities.

First, that it is where peace, love and joy trumps everything else.

Second, it is a space, both within and without, where we are constantly dislodged from the perception that the point we’ve come to is far enough.

I hear it as hopeful and not drudgery that we still have work to do, that there is more to come.

This second point, by the way, has nothing to do with whether we are good enough or worthy enough. It has to do with the wonderful, exciting, terrifying fact that growth and learning and new life are always waiting for us to step into.

The ego, of course, doesn't really believe this. Or, like it. Peace, love and joy can't be here! Call it whatever you want to, says the ego, it must be over there. It can't be now; it must be later. "Maybe if I went off to a monastery, then I could meditate." "I'll go to work with the Sisters of Charity in Calcutta, then I could have compassion." "If only I could be taken up in 'the rapture' when Jesus comes, then I will be saved." The ego, individual and collective, thinks a lot of nonsense.

So in this instance, the answer to the question, "are we there yet?" is "Heavens, no!"

For Jesus, the rule of God he was all about was a present mystical reality. It was the only authentic reality to which all other loves and actions are to be directed. It is always around us and within us. It is only our blindness and desperate attachments to all the various forms of conventional wisdom that prevent us from seeing the wonder of it, living in it, and living it out so that others can catch flame from its fire.

This is a fiercely radical teaching. Jesus is dismissing all attempts to locate the Kingdom of God outside of time.

The kingdom of God is an integral part of that which we are and the context in which we live. It will not come after our death. We will not go to it after we die. It is a state of consciousness, a way of looking at things, at feelings, at ideas and at people.

In the Qur'an the teaching is that God is as close as our jugular vein. That is a profound image.

There is nowhere that God is not because God is everything that is.

This little girl came home from Sunday School and asked her mother if what she had been taught that Sunday was true. "What is that?" asked her mother. "That God is everywhere." They were in the kitchen where mother was preparing the evening meal. The little girl was sitting at the table which was set for the meal.

"Is God in this house?" asked the girl.

“Yes.”

“Is God in this room?”

“Yes.”

The girl picked up the glass from which she had been drinking and asked, “Is God in this glass?”

“Yes, God is everywhere.”

With this the little girl clamped her hand over the glass and said, “OK God. I gotcha.”

Most Abrahamic religions have taught a version of that. Though the teaching is that God - read: peace, love and joy - is everywhere, we are also taught that God is really in the church. Or, God is really, really in the Bible or the Koran. Or, God is really, really in being a Baptist or Catholic. Or, God is really, really, really in the form of baptism you received or in the Eucharist. And, on and on.

Look at the teaching again.

“The Father’s realm
is spreading out
across the face of the earth,
and humanity is not able
to perceive it.”

As individuals and as societies, in our theologies and in our secular ideologies, we have, and keep adding, multiple ways to avoid what is “already spread out upon the earth.” We submerge ourselves in distractions so that we can remain among those who “aren’t aware of it.”

The chief feature of the ego is that it’s never here. It is so hard for us to stay present! We are always leaping ahead into the future. Or, being drug behind under

the heavy weight of the past. It's so much easier to think of whatever Jesus is teaching as something up ahead, like a Christmas present under a tree. It's much, much harder to accept the message of today's teaching that the kingdom is already here; the problem is that we keep missing it because we're looking for it in the wrong place, or in the wrong way.

In a sense it is like a Christmas present. It is given to us. Placed in our hands. Now, we have to unwrap it.

Are we there yet? Hardly.

The real coming of God's rule occurs moment by moment as we stand grounded in that immense presence and begin to open ourselves to the mysterious depth dimension interweaving all things, connecting the temporal sequence of our lives to an infinitely more spacious whole.

That awakening is itself the coming of the kingdom.

A frequently repeated scene from the house where I grew up contained this bit of dialogue:

“Where are you going?”

“Out?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

The lines of a budding mystic.

Where are we going? What are we going to do? Are we there yet? Are we doing what was/is intended?

No matter what your age, I'll bet most of you have been exposed to the story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll. There is a scene where Alice timidly asks the Cheshire Cat,

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where - " said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the Cat.

" - so long as I get 'somewhere'," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Where is the "somewhere" you hope for?

The "journey" image fills the pages of all sacred writings. The Jewish tradition begins with Abraham receiving a call to get up and leave his home and set out for an unknown-to-him land. Later the "children of Israel," as they are called, are miraculously freed from their status as slaves in Egypt and they journey for a promised land that none of them made it to, not even their leader, Moses.

When Jesus comes on the scene and after he is baptized by John and, then, has his own mystical experience that leads him to know his true identity, he, as the narratives have it, "sets his face to go to Jerusalem." The Jesus story, what he said and what he did and how he affected lives, is shaped by what happened along the way of that journey.

The first solid teaching of Jesus was not about believing anything. It was his simple but demanding invitation: "Follow me." And, those who did were known for over two hundred years as simply "followers of the way." Further, Jesus seemed content on allowing people to make up their own meaning systems out of their experience with him.

You can read certain passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Christian Testament, in the Koran and get the clear idea that there is a hoped for future - either political, religious or both - that people were and are looking forward to. In the Christian tradition both John the Baptist and Paul believed that either the day of God's justice and rule was about to dawn or that Jesus himself would return to establish a rule of peace and justice. Indeed, in a talk I gave in here a few weeks ago we talked about some of the history of those who have predicted the end of the world. None of them has ever come to pass.

Jesus believed, taught and lived that God's imperial rule is already present. That it is spread out but that people don't see it. Some do.

The theme throughout Thomas, and clearly presented here, is that of presence and awareness. Thank God for those, Jesus and some of his followers, who have trusted the truth of this, who have experienced it and expressed it to us. These are the poets, the mystics, the true saints.

Likely every person in this room has had moments of experiencing this. Moments of true presence and awareness.

William James in his classic "The Varieties of Religious Experience" gives these four characteristics of such experiences. He says they are ineffable, passive, transient, and noetic

Something is ineffable because it cannot be expressed in ordinary dualistic language. That is why poets and mystical speak in metaphors. This is why Jesus told parables. It is why the Zen Buddhists have a story telling tradition.

Though non-duality cannot be put into language spiritual teachers at least talk about it. Our culture is not conducive to non-dual mind. You have deliberately to turn some sounds off and open yourself to what is not easily available in our mindless society even to approach non-duality. I once heard Scott Adams, the cartoonist who draws Dilbert, say in an interview, "Don't worry about people stealing your ideas. If your ideas are any good, you'll have to ram them down people's throats." And some comic, commenting on a line in the Lord's Prayer in

light of current American culture said, “Don’t bother about not leading me into temptation. I can find my own way quite easily.”

What I do know is that you cannot practice non-duality or unitive consciousness as long as you exclude and marginalize others - whether it is women or people of different sexual orientations or people of religious or ethnic minorities or, in my experience, people with intellectual disabilities. Yet, look out at our culture. The cry from many quarters seems to be, “My group right or wrong.” G. K. Chesterton said that’s like saying, “My mother drunk or sober.”

Passive means that something is happening to us. This is painting with too broad a stroke and I know it. But, people intent on being religious are prone to say, “Look at what I have done, what we have built, what is the truth.” People who are spiritual are prone to say, “Look at what love has done to me.”

I don’t know about you but I look back over my shoulder and see the path, the journey, that has brought me here, and I think, “How did that happen? It is a miracle of major proportion that you and I are together today like this.

Steven Pinker says, “I would argue that nothing gives life more purpose than the realization that every moment of consciousness is a precious and fragile gift.”

And, Daniel Boorstin wrote, “I have observed that the world has suffered far less from ignorance than from pretensions to knowledge. It is not skeptics or explorers but fanatics and ideologues who menace decency and progress. No agnostic ever burned anyone at the stake or tortured a pagan, a heretic, or an unbeliever.”

“Transient” means that we can’t hold on to it. As I said earlier, if psycho-spiritual growth is the goal and what gives meaning to human existence, we don’t want to be wearing the same clothes we wore six weeks ago.

These moments of awareness and presence are also noetic. That means that they have a knowing component.

Our country and our world cultures are devolving into more and more tribalism. I understand that. People revert to tribalism when they are afraid and in some ways

these are scary times. Most of Jesus ministry and teachings were about restoring sight to those who were blind. These stories are all metaphorical. If the kingdom of God is spread out all around us, what keeps us from seeing it? I hear that there are rumors of a nuclear war between the U.S. and North Korea. There is an obvious blindness in a world that wants to end itself. There is an obvious blindness in a world that does not notice what is happening to men in our culture.

One of the great attractions of tribalism is that you don't actually have to think very much. All you need to know on any given subject is which side you're on. You pick up signals from everyone around you, you slowly winnow your acquaintances to those who will reinforce your world view, a tribal leader calls the shots, and everything slips into place. After a while, your immersion in tribal loyalty makes the activities of another tribe not just alien but close to incomprehensible.

Are we there yet? The answer is multi-faceted. In some ways, "Yes." In other ways, "No." In some ways we are already there. In other ways there is no place to get to. I love St. Teresa of Avila's line, "How can you enter a room you are already in?"

I said earlier, the journey we are on is one where peace, love and joy trump everything else. And, the journey is one where we are constantly dislodged from the perception that the point we have come to is far enough.

On this journey we are on, that is if and when we get up our courage to get on it, there come those times that the ego hates, times of darkness and doubt. The ways we once experienced and understood what we called "God" have fallen away. Perhaps the best conceptualization of these times has been done by the mystic who is known as John of the Cross in his writings on "the dark night of the soul." He writes of those times when both perceptions and ideas of God are taken from us. He says that the goal of these times is to draw the Self beyond the ego, he doesn't use these words, into a fuller union with the Sacred.

In her commentary on John's work Mirabai Starr writes:

"In the dark night, says John, the secret essence of the soul knows the truth and it calls out to God: Beloved, please remind me again and again that I am nothing.

Strip me of the consolations of my complacent spirituality. Plunge me into darkness where I cannot rely on any of my old tricks for maintaining my separation. Let me give up on trying to convince myself that my own spiritual deeds are bound to be pleasing to you. Take all my juicy spiritual feelings and dry them up, and then please light them on fire. Take my lofty spiritual concepts and plunge them into darkness, and then burn them. Let me love you. Let me quietly and with unutterable simplicity just love you.”

It almost sounds like he was warning us about the time in which we live. Warning us about the excesses of reform movements of any kind, religious or political, and the false light of the so-called Enlightenment.

We can't go forward by “knowing” in the usual way but only by a different kind of experiencing. If we go by what we already know, we will pull God back into our present categories and we won't get very far. That's why most people stay with a third-grade religious faith and why we have too few mystics and non-dual thinkers. The journey leads us into an illuminating darkness that is designed to deepen and mature our faith.

We are on a journey where we must be willing to proceed without any guarantees from our feelings or our intellect. The only real way on this trip is to turn the steering wheel over to Someone else.

For those of us who love and long to be in control, though none of us ever is - control is just an illusion - this journey may sound scary. Don't let it be. I'm not saying the darkness goes away. It doesn't. But, the anxiety about it does. Life is more spacious. Richard Rohr says it is like becoming an expandable suitcase. We are just “here.” And, “here” holds more than enough. We begin to “get it” that Jesus was right: the rule of God is in “here.” Not out there. Indeed the inner and the out have become one.

St. Augustine wrote in his “Confessions:”

“You were within, but I was without. You were with me, but I was not with you. So you called, you shouted, you broke through my deafness, you flared, blazed, and banished my blindness, you lavished your fragrance, and I gasped.”

That's the journey we have to look forward to.

Are we there yet?

We've only just begun.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.