

Cotton Patch Vespers

Jamaica Plain, March 2, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

Readings

Matthew 21:12-17 And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers." And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant; and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise'?" And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

The Cotton Patch Gospel, Matthew 21:12-17 Then Jesus went into First Church and pitched out the whole finance committee, tore up the investment and endowment records, and scrapped the long-range expansion plans. "My house shall be known for its commitment to God," he shouted, "but you have turned it into a religious racket." And the blind people and the broken people gathered around him in the church, and he made them well. But when the district superintendents and the ministers saw the fantastic things he was doing, and the young people loudly cheering in the church, "Hurrah for our Leader," they blew their stacks. "Don't you hear what these kids are screaming?" they growled. "Yes, indeed," Jesus exclaimed, "and haven't you ever read that 'I'll weave a hymn of praise from the babblings of babies and the cries of kids'?" He walked away, left the city and spent the night in Jonesboro.

Homily

In Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, the main character, Hazel Motes, founds the "First Church of Christ, Without Christ," where "the dead don't rise and the blind don't

see." A young disciple of Motes' hears him describing Jesus, and in his confusion, steals for the preacher an Egyptian mummy from the local museum. For Flannery O'Connor, a Georgia native like Clarence Jordan, that dusty, desiccated, lifeless figure represented much of the church's understanding of Jesus.

Clarence Jordan tried to take Jesus and his teachings in the Bible out of the museum and give them life, to show that they had some meaning for our world here and now. With an agriculture degree, in 1942 he founded Koinonia Farm (the name means "Community" in Greek) in rural Americus, Georgia. From the beginning the intentional community was interracial, communal, and pacifist - a little something to offend everyone. Jordan believe that people had to try to live out the values of the "Kingdom of God" that Jesus proclaimed, to attempt to show people how to do it, no matter how challenging. As a result, locals would shoot at the farm's children at play, or threaten to dynamite the buildings. Jordan felt that the farm provided a "lightning rod for hatred" to discharge.

Jimmy Carter was one of many people deeply influenced by Clarence Jordan. In the weeks before the 1980 presidential election, torture stopped throughout Latin America as rulers waited to see if Carter, with his program of "human rights," would be re-elected. Millard Fuller, a long-time Koinonia resident, credits Jordan as the spiritual father of the program which Fuller founded, Habitat for Humanity.

In his later years (he died in 1969 at the age of 57), Jordan earned a Doctorate in Biblical studies from the University of Louisville. His writing shows solid scholarship, knowledge of the ancient languages, and a tremendous love of the Bible. I'm reminded of television science programs where an archeologist finds an ancient skull, and using computer programs the appearance of the individual is recreated. Jordan took the figure of Jesus and clothed him with the world of the mid-20th century South. When I was in divinity school, I looked at the "Cotton Patch Gospels," but I wasn't very interested in the Bible then, and I didn't understand what Jordan was trying to do. His work is both a translation and a recasting of the New Testament stories.

In this familiar, but strange Gospel world, Herod is the governor of Georgia, and Jesus and his family "high tail it" to Mexico after his birth. The Gospel author, Matt, is a "revenue" for the IRS when Jesus calls him to be one of his "agents." The Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims is known as the "God Movement."

The "God Movement" is preached first, not to the Jewish community, but to "good white people," (who largely reject it) and then to Blacks, who play the role of the gentiles in traditional Scripture. The Sadducees who doubt life after death are the "liberals." In the familiar story of the "loaves and fishes," the initial food offering that is multiplied to feed the crowd of thousands is "5 boxes of crackers and 2 cans of sardines."

The Jerusalem Temple is transformed into First Church, Atlanta. In today's passage from Matthew 21, Jesus throws the moneychangers out of the Temple. In the Cotton Patch version he throws out First Church's finance committee, investment and endowment records, and long-range expansion plans. Later his "students" comment upon First Church's beautiful architecture: "You see all this layout, don't you? I've got news for you: not one piece of marble will be left upon another without being torn down" (like the Temple). Then when Jesus dies, the curtain of the sanctuary at First Church is torn in two from top to bottom.

Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel presents a radical call to discipleship and service, and a vision of faith that transcends comfortable cultural Christianity. In the weeks ahead, may we ponder what that radical call of the Kingdom of God or the "God Movement" means to us in our lives, and in the life of our congregation here at First Church.