

“The Real Rapture”

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

June 2, 2011

Ascension Day

There has been a lot of talk lately about the end of the world coming. Harold Camping made a prediction that, on May 21st, the end of the world would be here. Well, not really the end of the world, but the secret rapture would come. This meant that true Christians would be secretly snatched out of this world. The real end of the world would be on October 21st. May 21st came and went without a secret rapture. I heard that Mr. Camping then changed his tune a bit. On May 21st, Jesus secretly returned and the world will still end on October 21st.

What are we to make of all of this? Was Mr. Camping essentially right in his theology but a bit off in the timing? Or is Mr. Camping completely wrong? What better time to celebrate Ascension Day. That which occurred on Ascension Day can clear this all up.

In one sense, you can't blame Mr. Camping for wanting to know the will of God. His error is wanting to know that which God has not chosen to reveal: the time and date for the return of Jesus Christ in glory. Not only did Jesus not reveal this, but, according to His human nature, he did not know it Himself. He said, "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come." (Mark 13:32-33)

This desire to know what God does not reveal is not only sinful, but it is the root cause of the first sin. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to break God's command by promising them knowledge which God had not revealed to them. By eating the forbidden fruit, Satan said, "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen. 3:5)

Ever since that time the lure of secret knowledge has been a huge temptation which Satan has used to draw people away from God and the truth He has revealed. An early heresy in the Church was called *gnosticism*. From the Greek word for knowledge, gnosticism promised secret knowledge which was necessary for salvation but known only by the select few. Far from being the subject of a

dusty debate from the distant past, gnosticism and hidden knowledge are the basis for things like *The Da Vinci Code*, the hoopla about the Gospel of Judas, and so on. Seeds of doubt and disbelief are sown, either by Dan Brown or Harold Camping, when they tell you there is some secret knowledge which the Church is trying to hide or is known only by one individual and which you need for salvation.

As our Scripture readings for tonight show, God is not a secretive God. He does not try to hide things which then have to be “discovered” by men like Harold Camping. God is very “up front” and operates very much in the open. When He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for the sin of the world, He accomplished that in the most open way possible: a public execution. The death of Jesus Christ as the sacrifice for sin was open and witnessed by many.

When God confirmed His promises in Jesus Christ by raising Him from the dead, He did that in a very open way witnessed by many. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, “he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.” (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

None of this was done in secret. None of this was done privately. But there’s more. God is not only open in what He does, but He is very open in telling people what He has done and what they need to know. The saving work of Christ was done openly and its meaning was proclaimed openly. The Gospel was and is taught and preached publicly throughout the world – in home, churches, and the public square. It did not have to be figured out by one individual. It did not have to be “de-coded.”

If God is so open about Jesus’ first coming, why would anyone think He would be so secretive about Jesus’s second coming? In our text for today, Paul is addressing the same situation which Harold Camping was attempting to address: what will the return of Christ be like? Paul says that he

did not want the people of Thessalonica to be ignorant (literally “without knowledge”) about it. He then proceeds to tell them what it will be like.

Our Gospel reading for today says that Jesus was carried up into heaven in public – from the Mount of Olives near Bethany. His return will be just as public. Our First Lesson says that the disciples watched until a cloud hid Him from their sight. As they stared, two angels said to them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

Harold Camping is wrong when he says that Jesus returned secretly and spiritually on May 21st. This is not only wrong but dangerous. It can lead people to wonder if they missed His coming and cause them to worry or doubt.

Jesus will return publicly and visibly for all to see. As He was hidden by a cloud when He ascended, Jesus will come on the clouds when He descends. This is something which Jesus Himself clearly said in the Gospel of Matthew: “All the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:30)

This won't be something hidden or overlooked. Paul writes in the text, “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet God.” If Jesus had come on May 21st as Mr. Camping said, you would have known it. There is no secret second coming, only a very public and open second coming.

The same holds true for the so-called “rapture” of believers. Mr. Camping and his ilk proclaim a “secret rapture” in which believers will be covertly removed from earth before a seven year period of tribulation here on earth after which Jesus will come back to establish a 1,000 year kingdom on earth. This leads many people to fear whether they are “true Christians” who will be raptured or back-sliding Christians who will be “left behind” to go through the tribulation.

The Word of God knows no such secret rapture (not to mention no seven year tribulation or 1,000 year kingdom). God works out in the open, not in hiding. Paul writes that when the Lord comes openly and publicly, then those who died in Christ will be raised from the dead. (Nothing secret about that.) Those who are alive at Christ's coming will "be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." (Nothing unseen about that.) This will all be out in the open and seen by all.

Far from being scary or limited only to certain Christians who are "in the know", the descending from heaven of the Lord who previously ascended to heaven is a source of great joy for all Christians. For those who have rejected Christ, Christ's return will be a frightening time which will cause people to mourn when they see Him coming as He Himself said. However, for us and all who believe, it will be an exciting time. It will be the culmination of our salvation and all that is involved with it. "And so", Paul said, "we will be with the Lord forever."

Chrysostom, an early Church Father who lived in the 4th century described this ascension of believers as Christ honoring us. He said:

"If he is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within. And upon the coming of an affectionate father, his children indeed, and those who are worthy to be his children, are taken out in a chariot, that they may see and kiss him; but the housekeepers who have offended him remain within. We are carried upon the chariot of our Father. For he received him up in the clouds, and 'we shall be caught up in the clouds'. Do you see how great is the honor? And as he descends, we go forth to meet him, and, what is more blessed than all, so shall we be with him.

Harold Camping is not a kook or just someone with a strange opinion. He is a false prophet who distorts the Word of God. He brings ridicule upon the Christian Church and unnecessarily worries many faithful Christians. He must not be listened to. On this Ascension Day, we rejoice in Jesus' ascending openly and publicly into heaven to assume His position of power and glory at the right hand of God. We eagerly anticipate Jesus descending openly and publicly from heaven to bring us to be with Him in heaven. The end times are not troublesome or terrifying. We do not know the

day and the hour when Jesus will come, but we do know that He will come to take us home to unspeakable joy and unbelievable bliss. Therefore, we do not look to the secret codes devised by a man but a clear Word of Scripture given by God. We will not fear, but, as St. Paul says, “encourage one another with these words.” And so we do. And so we will. Amen.