

What did the world look like when Christ was preaching? Who were the people to whom Jesus addressed his words? I don't mean just a visible Jewish community of the towns and villages where he lived. I mean the whole cultural environment of his times. What was the whole civilization which he took upon himself and then used to talk to the world about the love of the Father?

The answer is not easy but there are writers who might serve as our guides. One of them is David Bentley Hart. "The late antique world within which Christianity arose was - if religion is any indicator - more than a little burdened by a sort of cosmic disenchantment, and the spiritualities it incubated within itself were pervaded by a profound and often almost desperate otherworldliness. It was not merely a time when Eastern esoterica, magic, the occult, and exotic sects flourished; all of that was to be expected in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of a great empire. It was also a time when religion and philosophy alike were increasingly concerned with escape from the conditions of earthly life, and when both often encouraged a contempt for the flesh more absolute, bitterly unworldly, and pessimistic than anything found in even the most exorbitant forms of Christian asceticism. Various mystery religions provided sacramental rites and imparted secret knowledge that could grant eternal life, leading the soul out of the dark prison house of this world and carrying it beyond the reach of the material order's endless cycles of birth and death. The longing for salvation often took the form of a quest after secret knowledge or mystical power and sometimes fixed itself upon "saviors" like Simon Magus, the sorcerer and Gnostic messiah, or Apollonius Ioniuss of Tyana, the Neo-Pythagorean sage and miracle worker; in every case, salvation was understood as emancipation from the bondage of the material universe." (*David Bentley Hart. Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies (p. 134). Kindle Edition.*) David Hart and many other authors agree that the world of antiquity was decadent. Humanity was desperately looking to escape the heavy burden of difficult and brutal life; and at the same time, suspecting that there might not be a way out.

In this context, this Sunday's reading starts shining with a new light. It sounds like a story of somebody who heard the moaning and begging of the world, and came with a word of comfort. But the comfort he offers is much more than the elevation of our emotions. The way he speaks and the things he tells us themselves become the light. Those words announce something completely new. They announce the liberation of the whole creation: defeat of darkness and manifestation of God's love. These are the words of the Redeemer. We realize that this Gospel is the Word of God and we don't have to be afraid.

“And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” In the opinion of many Rabbinic scholars, Gehenna was a place of suffering in which humans realize the magnitude of lost good in their life and the real gravity of evil they did. Being crushed by the consequences of our own sins seems much more horrible than any external violence we can suffer. Yet, at the same time, it has this amazing hint of hope. Since my actions are still in my hands, I can still do something. In following the Word of God, I can continue the search for the depth and power of good.

And here is another surprise: When I read this Gospel, I realize that Jesus doesn't speak only to the pagan culture of late antiquity. I realize that his words fit precisely in the context of everything that is not yet redeemed by his love, both in me and in society. These words bring light to every part of my soul, even those parts I was hiding from God's love. They show real proportions and shapes of things in our society and in our communities. This is the true Word of God.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.”