

Something We Don't See
ICS and the Training of a Messianic Imagination
Presidential Inaugural Address
Ronald A. Kuipers, May 11, 2018

Graduands, family and friends, Senators, Board Members, Faculty, Staff, Students, and Distinguished guests of the Institute for Christian Studies. On this joyous day of celebration of academic achievement, thank you for celebrating with us.

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Exactly eleven years ago to this day, on May 11, 2007, as ICS' freshly-minted Assistant Professor in the Philosophy of Religion I delivered an inaugural address entitled *Faith as the Art of the Possible: Invigorating Religious Tradition in an Amnesiac Society*. At that time, I had already been serving in the role of what we at ICS call "Senior Member" for two years. During that convocation I also had the privilege of giving a *laudatio* for the first graduand whose work I had the privilege to supervise, Chris Allers. Well, two PhD and 13 MA supervisions later, I now find myself in the position of ICS President. Had you asked that soon to be 38-year-old scholar back in 2007 whether he could see himself becoming the President of ICS eleven years later, he most certainly would have answered 'no'.

Yet this is precisely where I find myself today. God has surprised me with a new calling. Perhaps it is truer to say that God has added a significant new dimension to my existing vocation, for I plan to continue my works as a teacher and research scholar, and I remain a mentor to several of our wonderful graduate students. Yet this most recent change in job description is significant enough for me to take a deep, long pause and, in

that contemplative space, perform the spiritual work of discerning and imagining where the Spirit might be leading me as a faithful labourer in the communal work of Christian higher education. For, unless I strive to discern the precise nature of my calling in this moment, I will surely fail in my efforts to help this institution be a redemptive, indeed transformative, gift to the various communities it hopes to serve.

I did in fact struggle with the question of whether or not this is the role God is calling me to play at this time in the history of ICS. Troubling doubts and questions also arose once I had accepted the position. A penny dropped for me, however, during a recent dinner conversation I had with former ICS President Harry Fernhout (thanks to the hospitality of my good friends Bob and Roseanne Sweetman). Looking up from his plate, Harry turned to me and said, “So, Ron. Are you ready?” Now, I don’t know why these precise words came to me in that moment, but in response to his question I simply offered: “You know Harry, this could be the very reason God put me on this green earth.” Right then I experienced a rare and mysterious moment of conviction that I was, after all, precisely where I ought to be. “That’s good,” Harry responded with a chuckle, “You’re going to need that.”

Surely Harry was right to affirm the need for a strong sense of calling in order to acquit the responsibilities of ICS President successfully. But what exactly is the nature of the task to which I am being called? What does ICS need to become through my collaborative leadership, and what are the best steps to take in order for us to move in that direction? The way I answer these daunting and humbling questions will shape the contours of the vision I contribute to ICS. In suggesting any answers, then, I must never

forget that I am here only making my own unique contribution to a larger communal dialogue that precedes me and, if I do my job right, will also succeed me. My vision for ICS thus cannot, and does not, come from my head and heart alone. Rather, it is a vision that has been bequeathed to our unique academic community by those who have preceded us, one we must carefully tend so that we can pass it on, warm and alive, to those who will continue hopefully long after us. Thus my current understanding of the mission and potential of ICS has been indelibly shaped by what I first learned at the feet of my mentors and colleagues at ICS. One of my most important tasks as President, then, is to once again bring this shared communal vision for ICS to a level of explicit articulation, so that it can, as I have just said, be taken up anew and carried forward by another generation. Consider this address, then, as a first, tentative step in that direction.

So what does that vision look like from my current perspective? To me, ICS has always been a singular witness to the crucial difference that Christian faith makes in all areas of life. This is its Kuyperian heritage. ICS' reformational vision of the integration of faith and life, of the animating suffusion of faith throughout all of life, has supplied it with the conviction—not to mention the courage of that conviction—that there is not one societal sphere in which a uniquely Christian witness cannot make a redemptive, or transforming and healing, difference. In my original inaugural address, I described such faith as the 'art' of the possible, as a divinely-bequeathed skill or craft for perceiving and acting upon real, live possibilities for participating in God's healing work, especially in those desperate places where we humans all-too-often see only weakness, superfluosity, and futility—that is, impossibility. Back then, I suggested that such faith

could be nurtured by attending to the wisdom of a religious tradition with ancient roots, but I also warned that this task was becoming increasingly difficult to perform in an ‘amnesiac’ or forgetful secular society that confidently and stridently assumes it has no further need for what it considers to be outdated and outmoded religious tradition.

Looking back over the past eleven years, I am struck by how this intuition has stayed with me and continued to shape my teaching, research, and leadership at ICS. In my teaching and research, especially, my early understanding of faith as the ‘art of the possible’ has assumed the form of a growing obsession with the ‘messianic’, especially as that theme has begun to surface more and more in both non-Jewish and non-Christian contemporary philosophical literature. A growing number of people, it seems, are hunting for that ‘something we don’t see’, that peculiar vision or inspiration that promises to deliver us from our current malaise. A growing number now strain to hear that still, small voice that calls us away from destructive paths that proliferate human suffering and intensify creation’s groaning, and instead calls us onto paths of ever growing justice and peace—*shalom*. As the Jewish Studies scholar Eric Jacobson observes, “[w]e are in search of the messianic like many before us who have sought commonality in the dynamics of hope and despair. As a foundational trope which permeates the thought, faith, morality, aesthetics and authority of Western civilisation, the messianic is everywhere and nowhere.” (Jacobson 2011, 27)

Jacobson’s observation that the messianic is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere gives us not only a clue as to its character, but also to the temper of our times. Luke 17:20-21 reports Jesus enigmatically stating that God’s promised kingdom of

shalom is not coming with things that can be carefully observed and turned over. It will not come as something one can point to as being ‘here’ or ‘there’. For, Jesus says, this kingdom, God’s kingdom, is already somehow among us. It is both in our midst and already within us. Really? What does Jesus here see that we don’t see, or that we find exceedingly difficult to perceive and discern amidst the detritus of our modern, ‘progressive’ civilization? What is he trying to get us to see when he gives us the very enigmatic advice to stop looking for it ‘here’ or ‘there’? Where exactly is this kingdom that is everywhere and nowhere? To what and to where is Jesus Messiah calling us?

In answering this kind of question, we need to respect the mystery of divine love. While God’s healing energy flows through everyone and everything, leading us on toward that distant shore where the order of suffering and death will itself finally have passed away, we must not think of this love as something we can pin down or locate, and ultimately control. So for me, the messianic—this loaded religious and spiritual adjective—has come to connote the idea of a special kind of awareness or openness. This awareness leaves everything in place, yet helps us see all things new. The messianic is like a special antenna that is tuned to pick up a certain frequency that would otherwise go unheard. It describes a peculiar kind of sight or perception that turns our attention to those things that so often go unnoticed. The messianic attunes us to what the Roman Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney calls ‘epiphanies of the everyday’, allowing us to “[t]ouch the sacred enfolded in the seeds of ordinary things,” thus inviting us to once again experience the ultimate in the mundane. In Kearney’s inimitable words, a return to epiphanies of the everyday would, “bring us into dialogue with those who seek the divine

in the pause between two breaths. Transcendence in a thornbush. The Eucharist in a morsel of madeleine. The Kingdom in a cup of cold water. San Marco in a cobblestone. God in a street cry.” (Kearney 2006, 3).

But can we be even more specific in our description of this messianic attunement to the ‘here’ that is also ‘nowhere’, without thereby trying to pin it down or control it? That is, can we at least begin to discern the direction in which this voice leads and pulls us, so that we might take some tentative first steps on that way? To frame this question another way, if James Joyce tells us that God is a cry in the street, does that mean we can find God in any old sort of cry, or only a particular kind of cry? Kearney gives us a clue to answering this last question with his further reference to a cup of cold water, the cup that Jesus enjoins us to offer “these little ones” in Matthew 10. The messianic, when seen in this light, is that which attunes us to notice suffering and need, and to desire and work towards its redress. The cry in the street, in this case, might be the ‘cry’ of the homeless woman asking me for my spare change at the Queen’s Park subway station, or the silence of the man sleeping atop the grate that dispenses warm air on College Street as I make my way into work on a cold winter’s morning. As Timothy Schmalz’ ‘homeless Jesus’ sculpture, which most of us passed by as we entered this building tonight, reminds us, a messianic attunement compels us, *per impossibile*, to consider that every encounter with another is a possible epiphany—or, as the concluding lines of Gerard Manly Hopkins’ poem *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* describes, “Christ plays in ten thousand places/ Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/ To the Father through the features of men’s faces.”

And it is when we consider the messianic in this redemptive light that it gives us a window into the disturbing temper of our times. For the kingdom of God is ‘something we don’t see’, not only because it is neither here nor there, and can’t be pinned down, but also because of our willful blindness and stubborn refusal to recognize its possibility right here in our midst. We too often refuse to see the hurting stranger in our midst with messianic eyes, not only as someone calling for our help but also as someone whom *we can in fact help*. We refuse to believe that we can participate with God in the construction of another world, one that can be built within and from the shell of the old, yet in so doing one that also refuses to accept any amount of ‘collateral damage’ as the necessary price of what it considers to be progress. We refuse to think that we can play the role of a Joseph, Esther, Mordechai, or Daniel in our current systems of unjust power arrangements. And I include myself in this ‘we’: Many are the times that I have, in despair, judged our situation to be hopeless, and prayed God to help my unbelief. Like Steve Earle describes in his song *Jerusalem*: “The man on my TV told me it had always been that way, and there was nothing anyone could do or say. And I almost listened to him, I almost lost my mind....”

In those moments, a certain grace calls me to remember the witness of Christians like Arlette Zinck, Professor of English at the King’s University in Edmonton. Upon hearing Dennis Edney, the lawyer for child soldier Omar Khadr imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, describe his client’s legal situation as “utterly hopeless,” she challenged her colleagues and students with the simple statement: “we don’t do hopeless.” With these simple words, she launched her institution’s effort to educate and

ultimately repatriate this unjustly detained Canadian citizen, giving him a second chance at life, a chance to demonstrate he was not the terrorist that those locked in our civilization's progress narrative needed him to be. Arlette's witness helped us overcome our willful blindness, to see something we don't see.

Such messianic concern about our willful blindness struck me forcefully while listening to another song, *That's How Every Empire Falls* by the American folk singer John Prine. In the song's final verse, two lines in particular jump out and strike me with blunt force. They read: "If terror comes without a warning/ There must be something we don't see." In context, the entire verse reads: "A bitter wind blows through the country/ A hard rain falls on the sea/ If terror comes without a warning/ There must be something we don't see/ What fire begets this fire?/ Like torches thrown into the straw/ If no one asks, then no one answers/ That's how every empire falls." These lines haunt me. I worry that our society, our civilization, is becoming one in which we no longer ask why we are continually failing 'the least of these', a society in which we continue to throw torches upon an already raging fire of the driest straw, all while lacking the messianic imagination even to notice this skyward growing inferno, and pull the fire alarm that will finally wake us all from our destructive ideological slumber.

My hope for ICS is that we may prove to be a school that dares brush against the grain of our civilization's progress myth, a place where we teach our students to tell which way the wind is blowing, and that the storm we call Progress, as the Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin once reminded us, is the root cause of our civilization's mounting pile of catastrophe. ICS can be such a place because it can help its students

retain a hold upon a dangerous, yet hopeful religious memory. At ICS, we strive to instruct our students—including all those lifelong learners who come to us from beyond the thick ivory walls of the academy—to think about contemporary society, both its blessings and its curses, in light of a story about a God who made the world good, and loves it. At ICS we hope to arrange a meaningful encounter with the God who also laments with us all the damage we humans have wrought, and who comes right down into the muck of our broken existence to share our pain and suffer with us. We teach about an insistent God who, from those depths, empowers us with forgiveness and lights the way out of the mire. This story is, ultimately, a hopeful and joyful story; the darkness of our time demands that we continue to raise up people who can tell it and, more importantly, live it.

So, the messianic is ‘something we don’t see’ because it operates *incognito*, as Jesus tells us in Luke 17, and also because we so often refuse to attune ourselves to its very possibility, as John Prine fears. Yet there is also a third, related, sense in which it is something we don’t see; it somehow remains something we don’t see even *after* we have become attuned to its possibility. For, as Hebrews 11 tells us, in our broken world messianic faith in the promise of a kingdom come-down, a kingdom of full restoration and flourishing, may only take the form of an *assurance* of this hoped for, but not yet seen, thing. For it is not yet here. With the atheist liberal philosopher Richard Rorty, then, we should have the humility to admit that “at the moment, we have no idea *what* a redeemed social order would look like ... we can sketch no ground plan for the egalitarian cooperative commonwealth whose spires we glimpse in our dreams” (Rorty

1998, 238). And yet, it is vitally important for us to keep dreaming of, and perchance even fleetingly glimpse, these very spires.

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ICS graduands, I hope you recognize something of what I have here said about the messianic in the training you have received at ICS. Consider as well that, the more you attune your desires and imaginations to the messianic promise of healing and transformation found in scripture, the less visible you may become in the eyes of a civilization that only loves a disaster they still call Progress. Like the messianic itself, you too will become *incognito* in the eyes of such a world when you reject its understanding of success and instead bend your minds and energies to the possibility of another, very different world. How will you then appear in the world that is even now passing away, with its old order, if you appear at all? I recently saw a picture on Twitter that gestures at an answer to this question. The picture was of a tombstone, and beneath the name of the deceased the engraving read: 'Poet, Philosopher, and Failure.' Would that your life be so well remembered when your race is finally run! May your hiddenness within this damaged world, then, become a beacon in the transformed one, a world that, even now, is being composed from its ruins.

Finally, as you move on from here, I charge you to hold onto and cherish the messianic story you continued to learn and live while you studied at ICS, the story that proclaims that the meek, and not the mighty, will inherit the earth. Do not lose the vision you have glimpsed of those things that now remain hidden. Heed John Prine's words, from the same song I mentioned earlier: "The bells ring out on Sunday morning/ Like

echoes from another time/ All our innocence and yearning/ and sense of wonder left
behind/ Oh gentle hearts remember; What was that story? Is it lost?/ For when religion
loses vision/ That's how every empire falls.”

Works Cited

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