

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 26, 2023

The Feast of Christ the King

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar and Chief Operating Officer*

on

Matthew 25:31-46

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Lead on, Spirit

Today's Gospel parable brings to my mind another parable, that many of you will know well, from a variety of renditions, the Victorian "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens. His Ebenezer Scrooge, a merciless and isolated money lender, is visited by three spirits who revealed the impact of his miserly life, his past, his present, and his future. Out of them all the third spirit was the most fearsome: the silent figure of Christmas Yet to Come. Before the spirit can show him the possible upshot of his life, Ebenezer can feel what is coming:

'Ghost of the Future.' Ebenezer exclaimed, 'I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me.'

It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight before them.

'Lead on.' said Scrooge. 'Lead on. The night is waning fast, and it is precious time to me, I know. Lead on, Spirit.'

The parable that Jesus tells us today is nothing less than the coming of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come for all of us. It is an apocalyptic parable where the truth of life is uncovered to the surprise of all. You can hear the astonishment of those gathered before the glorified King of Judgment at the end of their lives. They are not judged by their religion or nation or any kind of identity. They are judged by what they did. Specifically, whether or not they served God in their midst.

"Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall the King answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these (of my family), ye did it not to me."

This parable is appropriately an apocalyptic parable not only because it deals with matters set at the end of the world, or the end of days. An apocalypse is truly an apocalypse when something hidden is revealed. Like the culprit at the end of a mystery, or the reading of test results to a patient, or even something more promising such as the lifting of the veil of the bride at her wedding. These kinds of revealings, or revelations, are less likely to be the end of the world, but they do serve as an end of a world, a decisive break with a past world. After an apocalypse, the old life is definitively over, and the new life has begun, and there is no going back, because the truth is hidden no more.

Christ's parable is an apocalypse, an uncovering. Hidden in the stranger, the impoverished, and the imprisoned, God was there the whole time! Right in front of them! And they missed out!

But it is not only a revelation for the poor souls who learn too late, it stands as a revelation for us, the readers, the hearers, and this parable refuses to stop asking the question to anyone who hears it: “Now that you know the truth, now that you know the twist at the end of the story, at the end of history, now that you know where God is, will you do anything about it?”

As this is the day we celebrate Christ as King, the end point of another liturgical Christian year, we must consider: “What sort of king is this?” After all, there are so many kinds of kings, so many iterations of monarchs throughout human history, of diverse characters, and of diverse powers, that to come to any conclusion about the character of God seems impossible.

And as we who sit here live in a realm where no monarch has hard power, the metaphor seems to be even less instructive. But, if we unfold the imagery of the parable we find ourselves with a familiar trope, the King Incognito, or the King in Disguise. A feature of several of Shakespeare’s plays, and countless other tales. The drama derived from this is so vivid, for the king gets to hear what his subjects really think about him, or gets key intelligence about the events for which he is responsible. To see the truth of the characters revealed in this way is just so delicious. And it is quite often that the king himself is changed for the better in what he discovers from his “unvarnished” talk.

The hidden king is a better judge of character, somehow, than the visible king. And who can tell how many historical kings have taken advantage of this option? The story is told that James V of Scotland would dress up (or rather, dress down) as a yeoman farmer, and would mingle with his subjects incognito, calling himself the Gudeman of Ballengeich (the Goodman of Ball-en-GEE). Thus disguised, James would find out about life from the perspective of his people, rather than just hearing what his nobles or clergy told him. All the more important because the role of supreme judge was still a key role of the monarch in the Scotland of his time, because that duty had not yet been delegated to professional judges as it had in England. But for us Christians, our King is not just disguised as one person, but many. Millions, if not, billions. What are we to do with such a potentially overwhelming sensibility?

Christ and Dickens tell us these tales of spiritual imagination, not primarily to scare us, but so that we might learn from the future before it happens, so that we might learn from the truth before it is obvious to everyone, but then too late. It is a horizon-searching, preventative spirituality, where we can, oddly enough, learn from our mistakes in the future just as well as our mistakes in the past.

For if we can, in our spiritual imagination and prayers, experience the apocalypse before the apocalypse, then we have a shot at less anguish and less ruin when all is uncovered. We might have a shot at being so much less surprised when God’s fullness is uncovered and discovered not only in heaven, but in every needy person we have ever met. The scouring truth is at once glorious and dreadful: God is with us. A double-edged insight. For in loving our neighbor, the King is loved. At the same time, in neglecting our neighbor, the King is neglected.

As we stand at the end of another Christian calendar year, at the end of the season of Pentecost, may we all find the resolve to be more apocalyptic. To learn from our possible end before it comes, to discover Christ the King of Creation in our suffering neighbors, and to shape our hearts and our institutions to be able to discover him, too, and act in kind, before it is too obvious yet too late. May we strain to see what has yet to be uncovered in all the apocalypses of our lives, so that what will have been an epic oversight, can instead become a salvage operation for all of us who say “Lord, Lord” but have scant evidence of this in our lives. While we still have breath, may we join with Mr. Scrooge in praying:

‘Lead on, Spirit. We know your purpose is to do us good, and as we hope to live to be another from what we were, we are prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Lead on. The night is waning fast, and it is precious time to us, we know. Lead on, Spirit.’