

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 29, 2023

The Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Ecclesiastes 11, 12

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Vision Makes All the Difference

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Catch me in just the right mood, in the right frame of mind,

You may well hear me argue that, between the two greatest Elizabethan dramatists,

It's Kit Marlowe who's the better writer than William Shakespeare.

I know that might strike many as heresy, and to be honest, part of making the argument

Is the frisson of making what appears to be a counter-intuitive point

But there's more to this argument.

Kit Marlowe may be the better writer, but Shakespeare is the better artist

In part because Shakespeare's vision of the human is far more nuanced, far more compelling.

You will never find in Shakespeare Marlowe's cultivated and cultured cynicism,

His spectacular resignation to death and darkness

Which paves the way for the manifold grotesqueries of Jacobean tragedy on the one hand,

Even as it reveals a kind of deep spiritual kinship

With the bluntly sobering violence and overwhelming mournfulness of Senecan tragedy.

You will never hear something quite like this, for instance, in Shakespeare—

It's from Marlowe's *Edward II*:

Robert Baldock, Edward's Chancellor,

Is speaking with Hugh Despenser the Younger, Edward's current favorite;

They've just watched the king be arrested and taken away

To be killed by servants of the Queen's lover, Mortimer: Baldock says:

"Reduce we all our lessons unto this:

To die, sweet Spencer, therefore we live we all

Spencer, all live to die, and rise to fall." [*Edward II*, IV.7]

Granted, as far as certainties go, few are more certain than that we will die.

As poet Philip Larkin puts it: "*Most* things may *never* happen: this *one* will."

But however certain the fact of our death,

We do ourselves no great favor when we reduce all our lessons unto this.

Which is part of the distinction between Marlowe and Shakespeare:

Again: what makes Shakespeare the greater artist despite Marlowe being the better stylist

Is that he's possessed of a greater vision, and it is a fundamentally Christian vision.

And that

Makes all

The difference.

Death, for Shakespeare, neither determines nor subverts the value of life
Few things in Shakespeare have such power...apart from love, or mercy.
Here's Prospero, at the end *The Tempest*:

"Now I want
Spirits to force, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer;
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be
Let your indulgence set me free." [*The Tempest*, V.Epilogue]

I think it's to our shame that Marlowe's humanist nihilism seems more familiar,
More contemporary to us,
Than Shakespeare's vision, even when, as Christians, we claim to share it.

In our reading from Ecclesiastes this evening, we get this lengthy series of images
Poetically describing physical decline and death:
The keepers of the house, the legs, trembling with age
The strong men, our shoulders, stooped forward,
The grinders, our teeth, shattered, absent
The windows, our eyes, darkened,
And at the end of it all comes the Preacher, responding:
Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
We'd be forgiven, I think,
(Again, given the unconscious nihilism of our age.)
For thinking that the Preacher is saying something like: whether we live or die, it's all pointless
"Reduce we all our lessons unto this."

But time and again, throughout the book of Ecclesiastes,
The Preacher has not said that life is vain exactly, but that it's smoke
The Hebrew word, HEVEL, translated here as vanity, means smoke:
Insubstantial. Passing. Here for a moment, gone in a flash.
What is not smoke, for the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, is God and God's commandments.
Recall in Chapter three of Ecclesiastes that there is a time to every purpose under heaven
And the Preacher lists series of things, birth, death, gathering, scattering, war, peace
All of which, in the end, are Hevel, smoke.
The pursuit of any of these things as the highest good, as the greatest good,
Means grasping at smoke
The moment you think you have it, it slips through your fingers, and you've nothing.
What the Preacher is wanting to do, is to draw our attention not to the purposes *under* heaven
Which all fade away, but to the purposes *of* heaven, which never fade.
Jesus might say it this way, in fact he did:
"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness
And all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt vi.33)
And what is the kingdom God but the living out in community
Of the commandment of God that we heard this morning and that echoes through the Gospel:
To Love?
This is a very particular vision that understands life and all of creation,
However fleeting or evanescent,
As caught up in, shot through with Love
Which is to say:
As meaningful, valuable, precious, beautiful, because it is loved: because it is loved by God.

We cannot apprehend the meaning of our lives,
We cannot grasp the meaningfulness of anything at all
If we approach it without love.
But all the world is ours if we receive it in love, through love.
To liberally paraphrase St John of the Cross with a nod to Ecclesiastes:
Desiring anything of this death-infected world, we grasp at smoke and we have nothing.
Desiring nothing but the God who is Love, we receive the fullness of God in love and,
Loving what God loves,
We receive all things as tokens of the abiding reality of love's delight.
In this vision, even death is transformed, revealed, really:
It is no longer normal, and no longer possible to normalize.
It is no longer the fundamental fearful certainty of our lives to which all is reduced:
The Love of God whose being is Love is the fundamental certainty of our lives
By and in which all things discover their growth and purpose.
In Christ, who, in love, took our death to give us his endless life,
It is death itself that becomes smoke, vanity, hevel
Conquered by love, defeated by love.
Death is no longer a thing to be accommodated or reconciled with:
The cross and empty tomb reveal it as an interloper, an unnatural blight on our humanity,
A horrible infection from which we have long suffered
But from which, thanks to Love's tender and gracious ministries,
Thanks to the care we have received from our wounded physician, we are finally coming 'round.
In Christ, in Love, we are no longer nihilistically or numbingly resigned to death
But we are freed, finally, to meaningfully mourn death's ravages,
The ways by which death has shrouded our lives and our world in shadow and smoke,
Freed to turn from death's ways,
Because we are freed to love with God's love,
To live the life of love that is God's own deathless life
And to rediscover the world, ourselves, each other, as beloved and precious.

This is the Christian vision.
Vision makes all the difference.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.