

The 25th Sunday after Trinity

I John 3: 1ff

Matt. 24: 23ff

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

Today we approach the end of the year as Christians mark time. We have been on a field trip through the key images and experiences of our faith trying to catch the heart and soul of God's activity through Jesus in history and in our own lives. But now it intensifies for as the Coming of the Kingdom is just ahead. Like most journeys we take, seeing and approaching the close of the trip tends to lead us to greater focus and urgency driven by the hope that we will not miss anything, fail to get that last panoramic vista pictured, and, that really important encounters will not have been passed by. If you have ever stood with a group of people who suddenly have their attention drawn to some dramatic sight, and all of them are pointing and commenting excitedly about what they witness, yet you cannot get a glimpse of the shared image, then you have a pretty good sense of what it means to feel that you have been left in the dark. In fact, it is easy to be misdirected or to have our attention deflected toward things that probably do not matter in the long run. I recall once being with a group of people who were to have an opportunity to hear Bishop N. T. Wright speak in a relatively small venue. Almost everyone was singularly focused and intent on what was to come, save one participant, who was busily working with an I-Pad or similar device. It seems he was attempting to communicate with someone else in the room by texting and missed most of the talk. He might as well have had ear phones plugged in listening to himself!! (This is part of the warning in the text today—who and what are we listening to?) If a spouse says, “Dear, you need to take the garbage out”, it is at one level of significance. But, if they say, “Dear, I need to get to the hospital” it is of another order!

The Gospel from St. Matthew today is a very tough text to hear and understand. It is what we call “apocalyptic”; meaning it deals with a view of the future—of coming to an ending, but also to a beginning. And as with all apocalyptic material it is urgent in carrying both a warning (keep your attention in the right place), and a promise, and so it is filled with contrast and contradiction; peril and hope. It is written with language that on first hearing seems at best strange, and at worst a bit loony. Our culture does not really talk much about the stars falling from the sky, unless they are bits of satellites losing orbital altitude, and images of the heavens being shaken do not fit our cosmology. Even though we confess in our Creeds a belief in a Second Coming of Christ, such words take back seat to our concerns about everyday life. First century metaphors are hard to fit into a twenty-first century world view. But before they are ignored perhaps like our field trip we should stop and ask if we have missed something. Perhaps the problem is a 21st century world view is missing something, and our attention is being distracted to the wrong directions, and with that there is deception about what is true. How does our text say it—Lo, here is Christ, do not believe it.

I heard a quote attributed to the Anglican poet and theologian, George Herbert,

“Philosophers have measured mountains;
Fathomed the depths of seas, of states and kings;
Walked with a staff to heaven, and traced fountains.
There are two vast, spacious things;

Yet there are few that sound them;

Sin and Love. (cannot confirm the exact source)

Both of the texts for today draw us on our journey to just the vastness and wonder of this point. They first ask us not to be diverted or deceived about two great mysteries which frame the Christian Faith: Human Sin and Divine Love. They remind us of the great struggle and challenge of being human and even more that the only answer to brokenness and evil is the remarkable faithfulness of God's love for the creation, including us perhaps most when we have lost our way, and have lost our vision of who we are (children of God). We are reminded that this is a cosmic struggle and not simply personal and private. Do not miss the panoramic view by being distracted.

John Cosin, 17th century bishop of Durham composed the Collect or Prayer of the Day (according to Massey Shepherd) on the basis of these 2 lessons. In doing so we pray what we believe, and so today we pray about these 2 realities that challenge us. They ask us to face the world and ourselves with a sense of honesty, and they also ask us to realize that the way God has chosen to deal with sin and evil is through a man, whose life and death encompass all that we face.

The great struggle we encounter in the world and in ourselves is that of sin and evil. And one of the tricks of the trade, so to speak, is that evil attempts to lead us to believe it does not really exist. Look at the myriad ways we devise to rationalize actions and attitudes we clearly know are inconsistent with a healthy life, yet we deny the reality we know to exist. We live in a culture which resists anything that sounds dogmatic, yet dogma of moral relativism has become the guiding principle for our decisions. It is a time when we relish pure freedom of choice in what we decide, but there is little that guides those choices in terms of good and bad; what seems to guide us is simply the randomness of the opportunity to be free to choose. What is denied is that good and evil, sin and love may be the poles between which our choices are made. It is the religion and illusion of secular society in which good and evil have no real meaning. This deception leaves us powerless to deal with the struggles and chaos that is all too real. The juxtaposition of human brokenness/sin and Divine compassion to heal and restore are the framework of life. Our culture has become reductionist. One model of this is to say that since God is love nothing else matters, and sin will be reduced like a sauce which will be short lived and glossed over--Love defines God rather than God defining love. Divine love takes sin seriously enough to die in order to show it!! The other unfortunate model is that sin is so rancorous nothing can be said save, you are guilty. And this denies grace. Neither is an adequate statement about the power of God's reign now and for the future.

Both the Gospel and the Epistle for this day suggest quite a different narrative for facing life with all its ambiguity and difficulty. They suggest that our true freedom is found in the steadfast love of God, who enters our existence by way of a human, Jesus of Nazareth. And they ask us to consider whether or not his unrelenting grace to all who encounter and are encountered by him is an answer to failure, meaningless wandering, loss of hope, and provides an open future. Their words leave us with the opportunity to ponder what the opposite of deception and emptiness look like. They do not ask for a naïve hope based on wishful thinking, nor for a wistful belief that somehow we will all come to our senses and just be better people. Rather they tell us, flat out, that God's love for us is so unbreakable that we and the world we inhabit are and will be

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transformed by it, and that love will be the one thing left when all else dissipates away. Love here spoken is not romantic, caught up in affect or lust, sentimentalized by self-absorption or personal need. It is love defined and experienced in the willingness of one person to seek first the well-being and ultimate good of another. It is gifting of the highest order.

Love is the emblem of eternity; it confounds all notion of time: effaces all memory of a beginning, all fear of an end. At the close of our annual journey through the Church year we are invited today to see it all in light of God's answer to our searching, our hurts, the presence of evil and sin—love only remains. Amen+