

Seeing the Face of Christ

I. The Reign of Christ

- A. The Liturgical Year comes to its conclusion today.
1. We began last December with the season of Advent, waiting for the coming of the Christ as a babe in Bethlehem.
 2. Now, this Last Sunday after Pentecost we conclude the liturgical progression of the Christian Year celebrating the reign of Christ in glory.
 3. It may seem that these are two entirely different images, but the scriptures appointed for this Sunday can help us with a panoramic vision that includes both,
 - a. Christ intimately “*with us*,” filling the deepest recesses of creation,
 - b. and Christ as the *Omega*, the archetype or authority by which everything in heaven and earth is measured and made.
- B. In the opening ch. of Ephesians we are introduced to the risen Christ who is exalted in glory and who reigns “*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...*”
1. This is not an authority that is to come - but is a present and realized reality.
 2. Christ already sits at the right hand of God.
 3. And the implications are very practical.
 - a. Those who follow Christ are empowered to live with the faith that they are not simply awash in a dangerous world that is governed by hostile authority, \ power \ and dominion.
 - b. Those who follow Christ are empowered to live with the faith that they are connected to the one who stands above worldly powers, because the Church is the Body of Christ.
 - c. “*This is the hope to which he has called you*,” says the writer to the Ephesians.
- C. From the 25th ch. of Matthew we have one of the great passages of the NT.
1. It is the only detailed depiction of a great and final Judgment in the whole of the NT. ---

2. Matthew places this drama at the pinnacle of his text, \ the last public teaching of Jesus before his Passion.
3. The measured prose and the majesty of these images have made a deep impression on our Western consciousness.
4. There is no middle ground here, \ no compromise.
 - a. The moral challenge is put down in front of us, ---
 - b. and we are to choose our response.
5. The opening words are like the lifting of a vast curtain on an unimaginably powerful entrance.
 - a. *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him...”*
 - b. The whole point of this scene is that there can be no detached observers.
 - (1. We ourselves stand before this great throne.
 - (2. We ourselves must move either to the right or left.
 - (3. Our own actions are our own judge -- right now.

II. The Pattern of Judgment

- A. As we listen to the Christ in glory, we are reminded of another similar passage at the outset of Jesus’ ministry (Lk. 4:16-21).
 1. Listen to the similarities.
 - a. The key images here: *I was hungry....I was thirsty....I was a stranger....I was naked....I was sick....I was in prison.*
 2. You almost find yourself back in that synagogue at Nazareth when the visitor reads from the scroll of Isaiah.
 - a. You hear him speaking of good news for the poor, \ release for captives, \ sight for the blind, \ freedom for the oppressed.
 - b. Then he rolls up the scroll, looks at the congregation, and says,
 - (1. *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*
 - c. At this moment Jesus defines the meaning of the mysterious coming of God in human flesh.
 - (1. It is to make clear to our humanity that we are called to give, / to be concerned, / to offer hospitality.
- B. Now the nations of the world stand before this same Jesus, risen and exalted by God, all of humanity whom he has called to this vocation of service.
 1. His call was not merely in words alone.

- a. His call was also in his own death.
- 2. As we see this vision and hear his words,
 - a. are there any of us who could assume that we could stand at his right hand?
 - b. We may recall deeds of kindness done, \ acts of hospitality, \ visits to one in sickness.
- 3. But it is very important to be clear that we are not being asked to hastily justify ourselves in our memory.
 - a. We are being told here in the present through this grand vision --that living for others is the very heart of the matter.
 - b. Everything we have been given is for sharing.

III. Three profoundly important ideas in Jesus' familiar words:

- A. The first is a statement about God.
 - 1. The God of Jesus, the God of the Bible, is not a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds or out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe.
 - a. Jesus, speaking as the Christ says, I am here, in the messiness and ambiguity of life, among "*the least of these.*"
 - b. God is here, particularly in my neighbor, the one who needs me.
 - c. You want to see the face of God? You want to see Jesus?
 - (1. Look into the face of one of the least of these, -- the vulnerable, \ the weak, \ our children, \ the war ravaged and displaced immigrants of the world.
 - (2. Today we have come to understand that "*the least of these*" must include the vulnerability of our planetary life species and eco-systems.
 - (3. In our inability to see that our life together and human flourishing depends on these we fail to see our own demise.
 - (4. We can see about us that judgment is happening now.---
- B. The second notion is about us, -- our seeing.
 - 1. We fail to see the Christ standing in front of us in the needs of others, in creation itself.
 - 2. We sometimes complain that God is elusive, \ difficult to know, \ silent and evasive.
 - a. Maybe we should confess that the problem is on our side.
 - b. We are those who tend to say, even when face to face with Christ, "*Lord when did we see you?*" //

3. The problem is a little like how do you describe a certain color to someone who is color blind.
 - a. One thing seems quite clear, that we've drawn the lines very differently today. Whether it's our church religions or our cultural religions.
 - (1. We talk about doctrine\ liberals and conservatives\ right and left wing,\ rules,\ worship,\ culture wars.
 - (2. Terrible atrocities are committed by people shouting, "*God is great,*" or "*We're #1.*"
 - (3. We see it across the world, religious leaders condemn each other,\ excommunicate each other\ and invest inordinate amounts of energy and resources fighting one another.
 - b. Who's in,\ who's out, \which doctrine is true,\ which is false,
 - (1. a whole laundry list of issues about which Jesus had absolutely nothing to say.
 - c. He did say, however, "*When you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.*"
 4. From Jesus' point of view we live under the illusion that we live a life separate and independent from one another.
 - a. The reality is that we are not isolated, separate individuals but we are connected at the deepest levels in the Christ.
 - (1. What we do affects everyone else.
 - (2. What we fail to do affects the whole.
 - b. Instead of objectifying ourselves and one another we need to be converted to seeing that in God's eyes we make up a beautiful symphony where all creation completes the beauty that is Christ.
 - c. We are all beautiful flowers but together we make an even more beautiful garden.
- C. The other important idea in Jesus' words is not social,\ political,\ economic \ or religious.
1. It is personal.
 - a. God wants not only a new world modeled on the values Jesus demonstrated in his life and death.
 - b. God wants us – each of us.
 2. God is not a social engineer but a God of love who is among us with the gift of life,
 - a. true,\ deep,\ authentic life.
 3. God wants to save us by touching our hearts with love.

- a. God wants to save us by persuading us to care and see other human beings who need us.
 - b. God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves, \ our own needs, \ and to teach us the fundamental lesson, \ the secret, \ the truth,
 - (1. that to love is to live.
 - c. Salvation is something we discover, often when we least expect it. ---
- D. What a legacy Jesus left for his followers,
- 1. to feed the hungry, \ give a drink to the thirsty, \ to welcome the stranger \ and clothe the naked, \ to care for the sick and reach out to the prisoner.
 - 2. He tells us that those in need are members of his family.
 - 3. That is the connection between Jesus and the Cosmic Christ present among us and all the world. (Station #8)

IV. A Prayer

- A. We pray today that our Lord would take us by the hand and show us the way, the truth and the life.
 - 1. Every day we are besieged by the hurting problems of this world.
 - 2. We confess that often we simply tune out the troubles of the world in order to survive.
 - a. We wonder how Jesus was able to move through the madness of his world without sometimes being crushed by the ‘too-muchness’ of it all.
 - b. Most of us have not learned to do that.
- B. So we pray that Christ would bring us back today to our real purpose and our real task.
 - 1. Sometimes the needs are under our own roof,
 - 2. sometimes down the street –
 - 3. often in far away lands with pinched, starving faces we will never see.
 - 4. Lord, show us the least of these. Show us how to reach out even as your son, Jesus did. *Amen.*

A professor from Utah State University has reduced the world's population proportionately from 6 billion to 100 people. If the entire world's population was 100 people, then:

*57 would be Asian

*21 would be Europeans

*14 would be North/South American

*8 would be African

*70 would be non-white

*50% of the world's wealth would be in the hands of 6 US citizens

*70 would be unable to read

*50 would be malnourished

*80 would live in substandard housing

*1 would have a college education

(Notes from an address by Dr. Keith Parks, Retired Mission Director, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Atlanta, GA)