

Sermons for the Journey

Fr. John Morrison

Proper 28 – Year A - 2017

Sunday, November 19, 2017

Judges 4:1-7

Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

“Again and again and again”

Next week is the Feast of Christ the King, almost suggesting that it has taken our Lord the entire Christian calendar to become so; however, that suggestion and celebration of Christ the King neglects one important point, a point that is summed up nicely in a softly sung couplet in a darkened church on Christmas Eve: “Jesus, Lord at thy birth.” There is never a time when Jesus is not Lord, when Jesus, God the Son, is not the eternal Second Person of the Trinity, and, if we think about it, during the Christian year we affirm this again and again in the lessons we hear read or read ourselves, in the hymns we sing, in the prayers we pray. Perhaps the most explicit illustration from the Bible occurs in the first chapter of John's Gospel when the evangelist proclaims that the eternal Word has existed since the beginning and, of course, we sing “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing, O come let us adore him.” Elsewhere in the Hymnal we discover the astounding and mind-altering proclamation, “Crown him the Son of God before the worlds began” and “Crown him of lords the Lord, who triumphed o'er the grave” and then, in an apt and powerful summation, “Crown him the Lord of heaven, enthroned in worlds above; crown him the King to whom is given the wondrous name of Love. Crown him with many crowns, as thrones before him fall, crown him ye kings, with many crowns, for He is King of all.” And not too long ago the Prospect Street Band would often remind us that “Our God reigns.”

Now let me segue to this morning's Old Testament lesson where in the opening verse of Judges, Chapter 4, we discover a severe reminder of just how easily we forget just where God is in the hierarchy of our daily lives: “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” Yet before this first verse in Chapter 4, I find the same pronouncement earlier, in Chapter 3, twice, and then subsequently in Chapter 6—and again—and again. No matter how many times Israel is rescued from its apostasy, from the surrounding powers who would conquer it, the nation proceeds to turn its back on God. The again functions as a kind of cataclysmic echo thundering across Israel's history. The same could very easily be said of us as the evil we do, the sin we embrace threatens to swallow us. Oh, no, you might be saying to yourself. We couldn't be as bad as all that; certainly not again and again and again. And yet the 20th century was the bloodiest

century in the history of the world and the 21st seems intent on perpetuating the course.

Several years ago, when I was resident in the Diocese of New York, I received my seasonal copy of *The Episcopal New Yorker*. I still receive the publication and it provides some interesting reading. For instance, on Wednesday I received my Fall issue and blazoned across the front page above the masthead two words shouted at me: Sin Issue. There's a headline that will grab your attention (at least it grabbed mine), especially since for the last few weeks we have been reminded on Sundays about the urgency of staying awake when the word of God is proclaimed and preached, of purifying ourselves so that you and I might be made children of God and heirs of eternal life, made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom, of reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting the Scriptures in order to hold fast and embrace the "blessed hope of everlasting life." And yet you and I are all too often guilty of falling asleep as far as sin is concerned, of forgetting the old saw that "history repeats itself; has to; no one listens." What the scriptures pronounce again and again is that we are sorely in need of a sense of sin. Perhaps the following illustration will demonstrate why such a sense is necessary.

William Kirkpatrick recounts the story of a colleague at Boston College who once "asked members of his philosophy class to write an anonymous essay about a personal struggle over right and wrong, good and evil. Most of the students, however, were unable to complete the assignment. 'Why?' the professor asked. 'Well,' the students said—and apparently this was said without irony--'we haven't done anything wrong.'" Then nine days ago at Diocesan convention, Fr. Duncan, delegates and alternates from this parish, and I sat through a video presentation on racial discrimination and reconciliation. Nothing new; same old, same old; with one notable exception as one speaker dared to mention the one indispensable ingredient in the recipe for the cure for sin, whether racial or any other manifestation: Jesus Christ, Lord of lords, God incarnate, man divine. All the programs in the world won't fix a thing unless there is a change in our hearts, a turning from sin toward God so that the refrain "again and again and again they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" is eradicated.

Shortly we will sing, "I want to walk as a child of the light, I want to follow Jesus...I want to look at Jesus....I want to be with Jesus." But why Jesus? And Kathleen Thomerson supplies the answer again and again in the refrain: because in Jesus Christ "there is no darkness at all"; in Jesus Christ, "the night and the day are both alike"; in Jesus Christ is disclosed the Lamb who "is the light of the City of God." Can we hear what the scriptures and the hymns say to us? Or are you and I falling asleep at the proclamation? Have we lulled ourselves into a deceptive sense of security in our investments and gone about our business seemingly immune to catastrophe and disaster as storms wreak havoc and Death runs amok on our streets and in our churches and schools? What happens when the Playwright rings down the curtain to signal the end of the drama? Will it be outer darkness? Or the weeping and gnashing of teeth? Will

we be like Woody Allen and assert rather wryly, "I am not afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens"?

Are you and I here this morning as creatures of habit merely doing again and again what we have been doing for ever so long, me at the altar for the last 40 years, you in the pew? Or are you and I here, wide awake, the Spirit of the living Lord of lords and King of kings rooted deep within us, each of us walking as a child of the light? Let me end with an observation that has helped me and perhaps will help you to answer these questions.

For the last two weeks I have been taking a course on Saint Augustine's *The City of God*, twenty-four lectures delivered by Professor Charles Matthews of the University of Virginia (and an Episcopalian). It took Augustine 26 years to write this magnum opus; if it takes me that long to read it I hope that the new heaven and the new earth has a really good library. I am not a scholar, but the scriptures and other scholars have helped to keep me awake again and again to the truth that each day I do what might not be called evil but still remains sin in the sight of the Lord, but also awake to the more blazing truth, the truth that consumes utterly the fact of sin, the truth that is Jesus Christ. Augustine reminds me of the fact of the resurrection of the body, of the fact that the details of my body will not be erased but will be retained and transfigured, that before the Fall, before Adam and Eve's disobedience, it was possible for humans to sin, that after the Fall and before the grace of Christ, it was not possible for humans not to sin, that after the grace of Christ has been received it became possible for you and me not to sin, that, after our Lord's second Coming, our wills would be strengthened in such a way that it would be no longer possible for us to sin.

Well, where does that leave us this morning? I think with a healthy awareness of the need for a continuing transformation in our lives as we journey toward Christ and his kingdom so that the whole course of your life and mine will be gathered into God each moment. And then, finally, we will arrive at that moment summed up by Augustine in a powerful single sentence: "We shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. For what other end is there for us, but to arrive at the kingdom which has no end."