

## Judgment Day

It often seems that a spiritual journey, after all of its travels, after all of its pain, after all of its discovery, ends in the very same place where it all began; only with new eyes to see, new ears to hear, a new heart to understand.

So it is with today's readings.

Today's gospel marks the end of Jesus' public ministry.

In this, his final public lesson, he drives it home that God is a God of the heartbroken, of the bewildered, of the outcast.

Since last Advent, which began last December, we've seen Jesus through Matthew's eyes.

As we started this journey nearly a year ago, you will recall that the opening chapters of Matthew find Jesus "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.... so that all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, were cured." Mt 4:24.

And today, the journey that is the public ministry of Jesus ends where it began.

As Jesus prepares us for the last day, once again, it is the sick, the outcast, and the despised, who are the apple of God's eye.

Those to whom Jesus goes we too are urged to go.

Those whom the world counts as insignificant, as replaceable, as a nuisance, are, in the eyes of God, the most precious.

So today, as Jesus himself is about to be judged by the protectors of the status quo, he tells us of the day when he will judge the whole world.

Today, we come face to face with judgment and with Jesus, the Judge.

How will he judge, this judge whose throne is the cross?

The one rejected by his own townsmen is now judge of all of humanity.

The one who refused to bow to Satan in exchange for power in this world is now Lord of all creation.

The beaten and killed one is now the one before whom all men and women stand in the dock; waiting.

How will he judge, this judge who embraces the worst among us, so that perhaps we might have the courage to face the worst that is in ourselves.

What might his judgment look like?

Probably it won't be painless.

Probably, blue ribbons won't be pinned to our collective chest.

And yet, perhaps it will be the time when we will hear, clearly and without doubt, the answer to that question that sits deep within every last one of us.

It is the question most directly asked by Pontius Pilate.

As he asks it, I imagine him taking a long drag on his half-burnt cigarette, pinched between nicotine-yellowed fingertips, glaring

into Jesus' eyes that fateful day, smoke seeping out with every word as he sneers the question:

"What is **truth**?"

What *is* truth?

That is the question, isn't it?

That radio guy Glen Beck says he's got the truth.

The TV evangelists say they've got the truth.

What is truth?

Isn't that, after all, the question that matters the most?

And yet, the answer is so elusive.

When you get right to it, not one of us knows the truth about ourselves or about our loved ones or about the larger world.

At best, we catch glimpses of what the truth might look like, but these are fleeting glimpses, gone almost before they appear.

And so we are each of us often blind to what motivates our conduct, blind to our foibles, blind to what might some day set us free.

We perhaps feel this blindness most acutely when we are vulnerable, when we are alone, when we are at prayer.

And so it is today, on judgment day, when Jesus, who is the truth, will at long last reveal us to ourselves, so that you and I might know the truth, about ourselves, our loved ones, our world.

The poet Gibran says that on that day, the clay that fills our ears will be pierced and the veil that veils our eyes will be lifted.

The poet Paul says: "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely." 1Cor13:12.

That's the hope, that's the promise, of judgment day.

It's bound to be chock full of surprises.

Imagine having the great mysteries of our lives, all of our "whys?" explained, revealed, made sense of.

It is at once terribly frightening (remember Jesus says that everything done in secret will be shouted from rooftops!).

Yet it is also comforting beyond imagination (for this same Jesus says come to me all you who are weary and over-burdened, and I will give you rest).

But most of all, I think we will all of us be surprised.

In the parable today, no one has a clue that kindnesses given or kindnesses withheld matter.

The sheep are as shocked as the goats!

Meaning, I think, that today's lesson is not so much: "Do good and you will earn your way into heaven" as it is: "Live the Gospel as faithfully as you can, but you'll still be blown away on the last day with what God has up his sleeve."

And there is something else.

That fiery pit?

If Jesus reveals anything, it's that no one is perfect in this life.

He chose disciples who were confused, frightened and at times deserters: in other words, he chose folks who look a lot like me, and perhaps like some of you.

We are all a mixture of weeds and wheat; gold mixed in with pig iron.

So my guess is that this fiery place is where the weeds get burned up, leaving only the wheat.

It's the place where the impurities in each of us are melted away, leaving only the gold.

As Meister Eckhart says: "What appear to be demons tearing at your soul are really angels, freeing you from all that separates you from God."

And so, most likely, it won't be what we know, and it certainly won't be whom we know, that saves us on that day.

My mom likes to say that now that I have a priest for a son, I'm home free!

I remind her that I don't think it works that way!

Nor will it be the creeds we have professed or the money we have paid or the virtue with which we think we have lived.

In the end, perhaps it comes down to seeing the world, and each other, through the eyes of Jesus, this Jesus who sees God in the

most ordinary routines of life, this Jesus, who sees God in the faces of the most ordinary people.

Perhaps it is as simple as pouring the stranger a cold glass of water -- NOT so that we might get something back -- but simply because -- simply because.

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