

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 gospel, which marks the end of Jesus' public ministry.

In this, his final public lesson, he drives it home that God is, and God has always been, and God will always be, a God of the heartbroken, of the bewildered, of the outcast.

How different from the God most people prefer to worship: the God of prosperity, the God of power or the God who's too busy to pay much attention — so we better take matters into our own hands!

Since Advent, which began last December, we've walked along side Jesus with Matthew as our guide.

We began with the opening chapters of Matthew to 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 — the least, the last, and the lost — who are the apple of God's eye.

Notice how "the least of these" don't stand with either the sheep or the goats: instead, it seems they stand with Jesus.

Those to whom Jesus goes we too are urged to go, not so that we can be like Jesus, but so we can meet Jesus — who comes to us as the least, the last, and the lost.

So today, as Jesus himself is about to be judged by big business and big politicians and by Hollywood, 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 the judge of all of humanity.

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

The rejected 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.

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 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?

The talk radio guys say they have it.

The TV evangelists with the big hair say they've got it.

What is truth?

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.

We are each of us vast oceans of beauty and corruption, utterly mysterious to ourselves and even more mysterious to others, so that at best, we catch only fleeting glimpses of truth, before it disappears into mist.

We are so often blind to what motivates our conduct, so often 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." 1 Cor. 13:12.

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 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 her sleeve."

And there is something else.

That fiery pit?

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

He chooses disciples who are confused, frightened and at times deserters: in other words, he chooses folks who look a lot like me, and perhaps like you too.

You don't have to live very long to come to the conclusion that we are all a mixture of weeds and wheat; gold mixed in with plenty of 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 who we know, that saves us on that day.

Nor will it be the creeds we have professed or the money we have given 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 a stranger a cold glass of water -- NOT so that we might get something back -- but simply because -- simply because.....

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