

“Surprisingly Astonished or Dismally Disappointed”

Matthew 25:31-46, CTK Sunday, November 26, 2017

Many of us are old enough to remember a man named Walter Cronkite, who was a broadcast journalist and the chief anchorman for CBS EVENING NEWS, actually for 19 years; from 1962 to 1981. During the “heyday” of CBS News in the 1960s and 1970s, he was often cited as “the most trusted man in America;” having been so named, repeatedly, in public opinion polls. And Walter Cronkite is best remembered for that departing catchphrase that he spoke at the end of every evening news broadcast: “And that’s the way it is” followed by the broadcast’s date! “And that’s the way it was on November 23, 1963,” etc., etc.

Yes, Walter Cronkite could tell us “that’s the way it is,” but only our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the ONE, “who triumphed o’er the grave and rose victorious in the strife for those he came to save,” can tell us about “the way it will one day be.”

Yes, there is something about these words of this Gospel lesson today that is sometimes very disturbing and unwelcomed by us when we hear them, that on another day, could actually be very reassuring and comforting to us; especially, if we or one of our loved ones has become the innocent victim of some type of horrible crime; and all the more so, if the one who committed that crime has never been brought to justice in this present world!

What about those parents, and there are thousands of them throughout our nation, whose daughter has been violently raped, or what about those parents whose son has been brutally murdered? Thousands of those parents are out there too!

For here, at long last, God’s promise to the whole human race will be unequivocally fulfilled, when he promises to us in Deuteronomy 32:35 a promise that St Paul reiterates for us in Romans 12:19: *“Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the LORD. “Never take your own revenge, my beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God!*

Yes, there is something that is very disturbing to us, at times, about these words of Jesus, whose lives have been transformed by the grace of God through the gift of faith that God has given to us in our Savior Jesus Christ!

Certainly the God, who is not willing *that “Any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and be saved”* (2 Peter 3:9) is the same God who so transforms our lives by his love, that he makes of us also a people who are not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance and be saved too.

For who among us, whose lives have been truly transformed by the love of God for us in Christ Jesus, could really ever take any comfort in the thought that there really is this place that Jesus talks about on several occasions—that is named hell? And here, Jesus is teaching us that hell was never created by our Heavenly Father as a place where beings should end up! No! You heard Jesus! Hell is a place that has been “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41)!

Friends, I don’t know about you, but I, for one, am very glad that St. Matthew’s Gospel does not end here with this very sobering announcement found in the last verse of our Gospel lesson today 46th verse of his 25th chapter. Instead, there are three more glorious chapters of St Matthew’s Gospel still to follow—all devoted to—the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death—of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let’s never forget that the One who speaks to us here with such a SHARP TONGUE about the UPCOMING JUDGMENT DAY *is the* One who goes on to give his all for us—so we might each have that blessed assurance, day after day, already in the here and now, that we will one day be numbered among the sheep at our Savior’s right hand, rather than to end up being numbered among the goats at our Savior’s left hand.

In his very next breath, St Matthew goes on to tell us: *“When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified”* (vv.1-2)!

Friends, this is the last Sunday of the Church Year; Christ the King Sunday! It's that Sunday that always reinforces for us those words that we profess every Sunday in the Nicene Creed with the whole Church on earth, about Christ our King—that one day: “He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdoms will have no end!”

For me, these words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson today are a beautiful summary for us of everything that Jesus has said to us up to this point in Matthew's Gospel! They are a reflection on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—the largest section of Jesus' sayings—that are recorded for anywhere in the whole New Testament!

If you were to ask me to sum up the whole Sermon on the Mount in one sentence, I would probably quote to you, the 5th of Jesus' 9 “Beatitudes” that are recorded for us at the beginning of this very challenging message. Here our Lord says: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7)!

All throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is calling up us as his disciples to allow our lives to become so radically transformed by the love that God the Heavenly Father has for us—that we too, by the grace of God, already in this life become people who are filled with DIVINE COMPASSION.

Certainly, the Apostle John understood this, when he says to us in I John 4:7-12, 20, *“Beloved let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brothers and sisters, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brothers and sisters whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen!”

Jesus is calling each of us, who have become his disciples, to allow our lives to now become so transformed by the love of God that we also, will become people, whose whole lives are now very much filled and marked by nothing less than the DIVINE COMPASSION OF GOD ourselves.

But most assuredly, the BIBLE ALSO TEACHES US—THAT ON THAT GREAT DAY—SOME PEOPLE WILL BE SURPRISINGLY ASTONISHED, WHILE OTHER PEOPLE WILL BE DISMALLY DISAPPOINTED.

Can you remember how Jesus told the chief priests and the elders of the people in the temple one day: *“Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before you!”? For John the Baptist came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your mind, (that is, repent of your sins) and believe him” (Matthew 21:31-32)!*

Jesus teaches us, elsewhere, that some people that are actually blessed with the greatest amount of money in this life, are unfortunately numbered among those people least willing, to give some of their wealth to benefit the truly helpless and poor people in this world!

Maybe, that's in large part due to the fact that they have never wanted for anything!

Can you remember that Parable that Jesus also teaches us about “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” recorded for us in Luke 16? It's about a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day! But unfortunately this rich man was completely oblivious to the presence of a poor man named Lazarus, who was lying outside of his magnificent home, on the ground near the front gate of this rich man's residence; day after day! The rich man would walk right by this poor soul, every day, but who in his spiritual blindness never took any notice of him!

When these two men, at their appointed time, enter the afterlife, Lazarus is surprisingly astonished though, now, the rich man becomes dismally disappointed!

In heaven, the lives of these two men are completely reversed! Father Abraham who is in heaven— is able to call down from heaven—to the former rich man—now being tormented in hell: “Child, remember that you in your lifetime received good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here and you are in anguish” (Luke 16:25)!

These really are some great questions that Jesus is presenting to us in our Gospel lesson today! For Jesus’ questions put to us, very succinctly, I believe, are these: “Have you ever seen my hungry?” “Have you ever seen me thirsty?” “Have you ever seen me as a stranger in this world?” “Have you ever seen me naked or sick or in prison?” And brothers and sisters, Jesus can say to most every one of us here in this beautiful sanctuary again this morning: “YES, YOU HAVE SEEN ME HUNGRY!

For you saw me hungry during those 40 days, when immediately after my Baptism, I was led up by the Holy Spirit of God out into in the wilderness, where I was tempted by the devil--to turn some of the stones lying on the ground, at that time, into loaves of bread! But I resisted the devil’s temptation, by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: “*Man cannot live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God!*”

“HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ME THIRSTY? YES, YOU HAVE SEEN ME THIRSTY! You remember seeing me on the cross, DON’T YOU, where I said, to fulfill the Old Testament Scriptures: ‘*I thirst,*’ because indeed I was thirsty! You remember seeing that Roman soldier lift up, on a pole, a sponge full of vinegar next to my mouth! How thoughtful!

“HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ME AS A STRANGER IN THIS WORLD?” YES, YOU HAVE SEEN ME TREATED AS A STRANGER IN THIS WORLD! You can recall those words of my beloved disciple named ‘John’ can’t you? “*He came into the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to his own people and his own people received him not!*”

YES, YOU HAVE ALSO SEEN ME AS A STRANGER! You remember how they treated me when I went back to my hometown in Nazareth and how the people there begged me to preach the sermon in my home synagogue one Sabbath Day, while I was there visiting my Mother Mary and Joseph! First they smiled at the words I was sharing with them, but then they grabbed a hold on me very forcibly and did their best to push me over the edge of a cliff to my certain death below, but I was able to pass through the crowd supernaturally because my time had not yet come!

YES, YOU HAVE ALSO SEEN ME NAKED. You have seen me naked, on the day when I was crucified and just an hour or two before this, when the Roman soldiers ripped off of me my clothing and then proceeded to whip me and to scourge me. I was naked then—and how they then clothed me with a purple robe and a crown of thorns! Just what I always wanted?”

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YES, YOU HAVE ALSO SEEN ME ALSO WHEN I WAS SICK, SO FEVERISH AND SO OVERCOME WITH HUMAN EMOTION—THAT I SWEATED AS IT WERE—GREAT DROPS OF BLOOD IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANNE, praying earnestly on my knees: “Father, if it be possible remove this cup from me! But not my will, but your will be done!”

YES, YOU HAVE SEEN ME LED AWAY TO PRISON, AT THAT EVERY TIME WHEN MY CLOSEST COMPANION FOLLOWED ME AT A DISTANCE, AND WHEN HE WAS ASKED AT THREE DIFFERENT TIMES IF HE KNEW ME; HE DENIED IT AT THE TOP OF HIS LUNGS, EVEN THROWING IN A FEW CHOICE CUSS WORDS!

Brothers and sisters, on this Christ the King Sunday, we can remember that technological societies are capable today of doing many wonderful and expert things! But it turns out that what Jesus is requesting from us as we make our way safely through our pilgrimage here on earth isn’t really ABOUT DOING WONDERFUL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND EXPERT THINGS! It’s much more about doing simple things!

Jesus is not going to say to any one of us on the last day: “YOU NEVER ENDED THE PROBLEM OF WORLD-WIDE HUNGER!” Ending world hunger would be wonderful, but too often these days we can become SO CAUGHT UP IN OUR GLOBAL CONCERNS—whether IT IS SAFE OR NOT TO EAT GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOODS—BUT HAVE NEVER EVEN TAKEN THE LITTLE TIME IT WOULD TAKE TO FEED ONE HUNGRY PERSON A MEAL!

EACH OF THESE SIX ACTS OF MERCY, JESUS CALLS US TO PARTICIPATE IN, IS DISARMINGLY SIMPLE: “When I was sick, you visited me!” Jesus doesn’t say: “I was sick and you cured me!”

And yet today, the real question I believe that Jesus is asking every one of us, is: “Are you finding me hard to track down! I’ll let you in on a little secret! You can still find me and meet me today in the hungry, thirsty, the naked. You’re wondering how to follow me? Okay, let me make it easy for you,” Jesus says: “Care for the sick; visit those in prisons! Just do it! Don’t make it any harder than it really is!”

Brothers and sisters I hope that your celebration of Thanksgiving Day now past was spent in the close company of family and friends—that resulted in a very memorable and joyful day for you! But let’s not forget that for you and me as Christians, every Sunday is also meant to be, in some respects, a Thanksgiving Feast Day.

Every Sunday at worship, we are asked by God the Father to give our thanks for the greatest event that has ever taken place in the history of the world, when the only Son from heaven was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, who became Man and through human language revealed so very about his Heavenly Father to us! He died on the cross to us save us from our sins! He was raised from the dead, three days later, to make us certain that the Heavenly Father has accepted the sacrifice he made on our behalf! Every Sunday is meant to be, by God’s design, a Thanksgiving Sunday!

It used to be that “Sunday dinner” was a really big deal for so many Americans in so many American homes. For those people who are numbered among the Sabbath Day-observant, church-going families, Sunday was the one day, without fail, that the family planned to spend together: First at church, then at home, then with relatives.

With a full house and expectant stomachs, Sunday dinner was a meal guaranteed to offer the magical combination of old favorites and some new recipes being test out on those family members from time to time. Every family had its own ethic-related Sunday dinner traditions: fried chicken, pot roast, plates of pasta, etc.

Fortunately, our National Day of Thanksgiving is somewhat less commercialized than other annually commemorated celebrations. However, the holiday itself is becoming a kind of great divide separating our American culture of the “haves” from the “have nots.” For the “haves,” Thanksgiving is the starting gun for the first frenetic round of holiday shopping.

As thousands of people in thousands of American communities “hit the malls,” it soon becomes irrefutable that overindulgence in turkey isn’t the only consuming binge marked by Thanksgiving. Isn’t this weekend the biggest shopping weekend, with the biggest sales, in your community?

This great capitalist nation upon which God has blessed such bounty is failing to provide the minimal means for survival to an ever-growing segment of our population.

When did we decide to shut our hearts and find there is no more love to give, no more bounty to share, no more fellowship to extend?

Why is it we can always find room for one more holiday party and always find room for one more piece of turkey? Why is it that we can find room for one more car in the mall’s parking lot; room for one more present hidden in the hall closet? Why is it that we will always find room for one more charge on our credit card or room for one more blouse or shirt?

What will it take to get us to make room for . . . one more name on our “need to visit” list; or room for one more personal note to be jotted on a Christmas card? What will it take for us to give one more hour of volunteer work at a mission?

And what will it take, for there to become room for one more person in our hearts? Especially when that person is Jesus? *“For truly I say to you, whatever you have done for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me!”* Amen