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THE LINE

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UP CLOSE

& PERSONAL

BY THE RIGHT REV.
WINFIELD MOTT

Do you remember when Aunt Mary came and stayed for three weeks? Much as you loved her, you were relieved when she finally left. Our toleration for closeness has limits. Just because I like you doesn't mean I want you to live in my house or monopolize my social life. For most people, living in close quarters needs to be balanced with a concern for privacy.

In some ways, the better the person, the less desirable it is to live with them. Note that the spouses or families of great saints did not find it easy to live with them, and a disproportionate number of saints had no spouse at all. More than a few have recorded a contentious history with family, including Jesus. Genuinely righteous people tend to make us feel very unrighteous in comparison, even when the saint is not in any way judgmental or arrogant.

When God appeared to Isaiah, complete with six-winged seraphim singing the Sanctus and censuring the temple while the

foundations shook, Isaiah's response was "Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:1-5). Far beyond any righteous saint, being in the presence of the almighty and all-holy God is a terrifying experience for a sinful human (and we are all sinners). When Jesus cast out some demons in the region of the Gadarenes, the people reacted by asking him to leave (Matthew 9:34). The presence of the Holy One can be very disturbing and uncomfortable for us sinners.

It is a basic of our belief that God is omnipresent, he is everywhere. Likewise, we believe the Holy Spirit comes to us in baptism, and stays, and that Jesus is fully present in the Eucharist, so in receiving Communion, we are "made one Body with him, that he may dwell in us and we in him"

The Convocation of the West Summary Statement

We are a missionary people living out the historical, Biblical Christian faith in the Anglican tradition.



(BCP Eucharistic Canon, at the epiclesis). We are thus living every minute of our day in complete togetherness with God, the same God whose presence terrified the Gadarenes and Isaiah, and a whole lot of other people.

Advent is a time of preparation for the celebration of the Incarnation, the physical entrance of our Lord in human vesture into our world. But our Christmas observance is not in itself the entrance. That, of course, happened two millennia ago. It is instead a celebration of that past event and the acknowledgement of the powerful love behind the action, so that Incarnation is still with us, now in Eucharistic form, for all time and beyond. The Advent preparation is thus not an expectation that a missing Messiah will arrive on Christmas Eve, but an internal preparation for a celebration of a very present Messiah, a rethinking and awareness about how to respond to the continuous presence.

It is funny how that presence affects us. If, as a majority of people agree, God is everywhere, that means he is right here. What sort of God or presence is a much murkier concept. But the interesting thing is that people who admit to the presence seldom seem to notice it. This encompasses people whose belief is a sort of vague nature-oriented being, through devout Christians or Muslims whose belief is the orthodox understanding of the Divine. As we live our lives making frequent sinful choices, it is hard to imagine that people are much aware of that presence. Many who go to some effort to present a very morally scrubbed image when in church or with friends or colleagues seem unaware that God is unfailingly with them through all their thoughts and deeds. One wonders, as one instance, about the war in Ukraine where thousands of Orthodox Christians try to kill each other over some turf, and many western and American Christians are delighted to supply the weapons to make it continue.

There is a tendency in some quarters to make the presence of God with us to be that of a benign friend who is there to comfort you, ratify your decisions and actions and otherwise stay out of the way until you summon him to heal a sickness, get you out of a mess, or some other service which you need in order for life to be happy and prosperous.

There is also the opposite tendency to use the threat of an angry righteous God to scare your kids out of misbehaving or justify your hostile actions toward your enemies or those you despise. It is common for nations, churches, and individuals to assert that "God is on our side," assuming that his presence is to be a cheerleader and frontline warrior to fight our battles and smite our enemies.

These tendencies do not correspond to the reality of the Almighty. The absolute awe of encountering the Creator who has made the universe, and has simultaneously created micro bacteria, is beyond our comprehension. To realize he is also fully present next to me, "dwells" with me, should trigger a reaction like Isaiah's or the crowds in Palestine who witnessed Jesus' miracles as they happened (Mark 7:37, Matt. 9:8, 8:27).

A worthy Advent project, therefore, for the appropriate internal preparation is work on awareness of the awesome almighty God who is with you at all times. The presence is true whether we are conscious of it or not, indeed even if someone denies it. To "prepare the way" is, thus, not getting ready to welcome an arrival, but to become more aware of, and rejoice in, a Presence only dimly grasped. "Ya llego," "he has already arrived," as the Spanish-language entrance hymn puts it. Our liturgy often



assumes it; the Morning Prayer collect, "...God, who has safely brought us to the beginning of this day,...," presumes God was with us through the night. "The Body of Christ," announced to us by the priest as we receive Communion, does not say: "This might be the Body of Christ," or "This is a symbol of..." It is a simple statement, a direct quote from Jesus, and it is absolute. We receive Christ, a Presence internalized. Throughout the

liturgical texts of the Church, there are many such references.

Yet the feel of our worship often seems as if we are talking about someone out there, far away. The 16th Century reformer Ulrich Zwingli denied that Christ was present in the Eucharist, because in Zwingli's mind, Jesus had risen to heaven and dwells there, so he cannot also be here. Zwingli is not alone. There are many who cannot grasp the nature of a Being beyond time and space, both dwelling within us and simultaneously present throughout the universe. Since humans cannot do that, at least in this life, the literal-based mind cannot imagine it.

But God can, and does. Emmanuel means "God with us." That is a simple statement, but a profound truth. It is the job of Advent to acquaint us with that truth and work to prepare our hearts to receive it, and apprehend that the awesome God of the Universe dwells also within, that the terrifying Power who can make or break planets is also an infinite Power of actualizing love, towards us and towards all his creatures.

How else can we respond except to sing:

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come,
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing"



Advent

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

And as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts, [Jesus] said, "As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." And they asked him, saying, "Master, but when shall these things be? And what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?" [Luke 21:5-7]

On Sunday, November 13, our Gospel lesson for the day started with this passage. It instantly reminded me of one of my sermons that went over like a proverbial lead balloon. I had taken the rather unpopular stand that this apocalyptic passage was speaking of and only of the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. What convinced me of this was the statement that Jesus makes later on, "Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled." [Luke 21:34]. But, as I looked at this passage on this Sunday in November, it struck me that there seems to be more to this passage than "what meets the eye".

I must admit that I was not very comfortable with my original interpretation. In part, there seems to be so much more than the immediate event that took place in 70 AD contained in Jesus' revelation. He seems to be talking about many events at the same time. And isn't this the nature of much of what in the Bible can be classified as apocalyptic? Then, as I read my evening lessons from Isaiah out of my Roman Catholic Study Bible, there was an interesting interpretation that got me thinking.

Now, before I go on, let me digress and explain that I have a habit of reading out of different study Bibles. For the last two

years, I have used the Eastern Orthodox Study Bible. Before that, I used a protestant one. Now, commencing this new Liturgical year (not calendar year), I am using a Roman Catholic Study Bible. I find using different study Bibles very interesting. Most interpretations come close to each other. Others are very different. But all are interesting to me. Not only does it give me a better insight into the Bible, it also provides me a much better understanding of my brothers and sisters in Christ who are part of different branches of His one, true, catholic, and apostolic Church.

In the Roman Catholic Study Bible I am currently using, the theologian said of a passage from Isaiah that this passage was speaking to its immediate audience of the liberation of the Jewish people and their return from Babylon. But he also referenced Matthew 3:3 and the other Gospels and wrote that Isaiah was predicting Saint John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. It was none other than:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway of our God.' Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it." [Isaiah 40:1-5]

If what the Roman Catholic theologian wrote is true, and

I believe it is, then the passage we read on that Sunday in November would be speaking on many levels.

I use this example as an introduction for an idea that struck me for the first time when I heard the priest read the passage quoted at the beginning of this article. For so long I believed that Christ was speaking only of the Temple and its destruction on 70 AD. But now, I think it references His Church here on earth as we approach the end of the end-times. And I cannot help but think that Jesus captures what is happening now in the United States.

“And as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts...” Many people, when they speak of their church, speak very lovingly about its decorations, its structure, and/or its setting. They tell you about their ancient organ or their carved woodwork or their stained glass. There is a church I know whose webpage I looked at to get an idea of how we should design our own church webpage when webpages for churches was a new thing. This webpage’s entire article was on its stained glass windows, which were Tiffany, and nothing about the church itself. Although I understand the beauty of a church building, what seems to be lost is that this beauty is to honor God. And this beauty, although nice, is not the most important facet of a church. What is of prime importance always for any church is that we worship the Lord in the beauty OF HOLINESS. A beautiful building helps, but it is not essential.

Yet, what does Jesus tell us? *“As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.”* Think about our churches today. The beauty of the building will be torn down. That is the immediate interpretation. We will probably see the destruction of churches probably akin to what happened in France during the French Revolution. Whole churches were destroyed or converted into public buildings. This may happen at the end of ages.

But think about this passage a little more. Why have so many left their home churches? The beautiful building is still standing. Maybe for us in our present Age and in our present society this reference is much more symbolic. Maybe what is being torn down is the beauty that rests within holy worship. If the worship is flat and meaningless; if we are not worshiping God; if we are worshiping our community, or ourselves wouldn’t this be the same as tearing down a beautiful structure like the Temple? If we are NOT worshiping the Lord or NOT worshiping Him in the beauty of holiness, are we not

destroying His Holy Church? Granted, it is like an internal wood rot, but the result will be the same, wouldn’t it?

And what about all those who leave? Many of them are now worshiping in homes, in rented storefronts, and in auditoriums. Many of them have made the spaces quite special, but what really makes them beautiful is the reverence in which they worship. And just to make this clear, as I have visited many churches with differing ways of worshiping, although I have my preferred method, I can honestly say I have found that when they are truly worshiping the Lord in the beauty of holiness, the worship is, in fact, beautiful!

It is my firm belief that we have entered the season of the Temple’s destruction. Churches, traditions and religions are being torn down. The true Church of Christ will stand – we have Jesus’ promise of that – but we have entered the period of destruction. How long it will take, I do not believe anyone knows. But it will continue, and we have to be ready. And the best way to be ready is to understand what truly makes a church beautiful. It is not the building or the windows. It is not the setting or its history. It is rather that the right worship of the Lord is being done. It is the people worshiping the Lord in the beauty of holiness!

We have just entered the Season of Advent. Our thoughts should not be on the past; our thoughts should be on the future. We enter the period of anticipation – anticipation for Christ’s return. I believe most of us do not like to think about this because of the awful apocalyptic images we have of the End-Times. And, although they can be quite horrific, we need to remember that, at the end, is Christ reigning over a new heaven and a new earth and we with Him.

Advent is a period where we look to Christ’s return with anticipation and wonder, and no one has these feelings correct except for our children. Children understand anticipation. They anticipate Christmas correctly, but for the wrong reason. They can hardly sleep anticipating Santa Claus and the gifts on Christmas morning. We should have the same anticipation, not for Santa Claus, but for Christ.

So as we go through these seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Lent, let us keep our eyes ever on our Lord. And let us be an anticipatory people, worshiping the Lord in the beauty of holiness and realizing as things fall apart around us, that it is not things that make a church. It is people – people in love with the Lord.

Amen.



Feast of Christ The King

Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:35-43

A Sermon Message By Rev. J. M. Kelman

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer”

Today is the Feast of Christ the King.

That is, it is a celebration of the Sovereignty—the Monarchy, if you will—of Christ over all things. As we hear in our Colossians lesson “all things have been created through him, and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Think about that: Jesus is preeminent over creation because he preceded it, he made it, and it is because of Jesus that matter itself continues to exist.

Consider the beginning of the creation of all things: the garden of Eden. What was this paradise? It was God gardening and appointing a caretaker couple with whom he had community: communion, which was “paradise” for mankind.

But what happened when Adam sinned alongside Eve? In sinning, that garden, that matter, that kingdom, was handed over. Adam and Eve abdicated their role as caretakers of the Creation which the triune God created to prepare man for a more perfect communion: God’s nature is to give, for perfect love gives rather than takes, and the one loved receives. Adam, when he sinned, forfeited his custodianship of God’s earthly kingdom, for it is through this that death enters into the scope of the human experience and the sin that so easily ensnares our species. This is part of why we read of Jesus being tempted by Satan,

Matthew 4:8:

“The devil took him to an extremely high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The devil said to Jesus, “I will give you all of these things if you will fall down and express adoration to me.”

Satan may not be lying here, but like in the garden, being a deceitful bender of the truth. Satan had the keys to the earthly kingdom after Adam, and the history of God was the resistance movement to take the kingdom back, because he loves us. Satan offers what he is able to offer.

This gives us context for the Old Testament. It is a history of God having relationship with his people to repair the damage we have done to our kind and to the world, to bring about the fullness of the Kingdom of God, which will culminate in the new heaven and the new earth. He did this, as the author of Hebrews says, through people of abiding faith whom he called towards his plans, Abraham, Moses, David, Samuel, Isaiah, (and Jonah) and so on until St John the Baptist. He is called the greatest because he is the prophet that heralds the entry of the long-absent King here to reclaim the kingdom that was forfeited. The Gospel we hear so much of just means “Good News” and that good news is that the king is here to

set all creation, all humanity, and each individual soul right. Our collect for the day says “whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords”

In this feast, as the last Sunday of the church year, we celebrate the sovereign victory of Jesus Christ, as we look for the fulfillment of the Kingdom in his second coming. As the Renewed Ancient liturgy says, “In the fullness of time, put all things in subjection under your Christ, and bring us with all your saints into the joy of your heavenly kingdom, where we shall see our Lord face to face.”

But we are confronted with a big, glaring question: our lesson in Luke doesn’t feel like this does it?

At this point Jesus has been betrayed, falsely accused, victim of political manipulation, abused, reviled, and mocked. Yet, as Jesus is suffering on the cross, he still offers hope: full of self-control, and kingly dignity of care for others, and even upon death is sovereign over the surrender of his spirit.

Luke shows Jesus’ apparent helplessness as the crown—both Jew and Gentile—mock him, shouting for him to save himself.

Jesus doesn’t sound very before all things, above all things, firstborn of all creation.

Bound, suffering, dying on a cross, with those in the most power mocking him as a would-be king. Everything they do is designed to mock the messiah role that Jesus has been: the soldiers offer a sour wine known only to the poorest in a mock royal cup bearing, and Jesus receives a title designed to be ironic.

Yet, in this passage, the two criminals crucified alongside Christ show us who Jesus is, not the crowds. This section appears only in Luke’s Gospel.

We have two characters of equal guilt: one who mocks, and the other who sees Jesus.

The mocking criminal joins the crowd. If you notice, Luke plays with the irony: The crowd, the soldiers, and even the crucified criminal who will also die the most shameful death possible, tell Jesus to save himself, if he’s really the sovereign.

In fact, this criminal is more daring than the crowds: he says, “save yourself and us as well.”

You can imagine the mocking impossibility of the whole thing: a three-and-a-half-year movement of God, culminating in Palm Sunday: people crying out to Jesus saying Hosannah, which means “Save now.”

Within a week, those hopes, even by nearly all his closest friends and disciples, were crushed at his crucifixion, and this thief presses the total loss even further: you didn’t save yourself and you didn’t save us.

This sounds cruel, and cruel it is. but we, who live on the other



side of the resurrection, know differently. Jesus says to these scorning mockers, crying out for salvation behind a mask of cynicism: he says to them, and he says to me, and he says to you: "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"

None of us know what we are doing.

I didn't know what I was doing, or what I was getting into when I converted to Christianity as a teenager. Before Christ we are equal in our flailing searching for what we are about. Colossians 1:12 says "God the Father has granted us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints of Light"

Those who have seen Christ, are quite accurately spiritually illuminated: we begin to know what we are about, for we receive that identity, that knowledge of reality from Christ.

In Jesus' reconciling of all things to himself, there are only two paths:

- Those who, like all these witnesses, reject Christ.
- Those who are for Christ; that is, those who choose to see Christ for who he is, recognizing his sovereignty: that Jesus is Lord.

The seeing criminal, which is often called the repentant thief, represents the latter path. When others tell Jesus to save himself, he sees Jesus as the righteous one, who did not deserve his death, and who is still the messiah—the King, despite apparent defeat: "we are receiving the due reward for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong" and to Jesus he says "Lord, [which is to say King] remember me when you come in your Kingdom"

We are all these criminals:

We have all sinned, we all are subject to the consequences of our brokenness, our poor decisions, and our poor perspective, for not seeing ourselves for who we are, and "missing the mark" of righteousness.

We cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try.

And Jesus was not there to save himself: his entire mission was to save those who were so lost they could not save themselves.

When we say yes to Christ, Jesus says to us "Today you will be with me in paradise"

Now Paradise, at the fall of Adam and Eve was guarded with a flaming sword by an Angel. Adam and Eve were exiled from the place that God had prepared for them. Yet Jesus, when we see him, invites us to begin the journey back into paradise, for through his death and resurrection, he has also removed the sword.

This is a lot more than what the thief asked for. He asked to be remembered, having accepted that his guilt was just, and he deserved what he was suffering.

St Ambrose commented on this thief saying "The Lord always grants more than one asks"

Paul continues in our Colossians reading: "he has delivered us from the powers of darkness and has translated us into the Kingdom of Christ."

"In him, we have our redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

All who come into the kingdom have seen Jesus, it just differs in the way in which one sees Jesus.

• The thief on the cross, saw Jesus, saw who he was, what the world is, and asked for Jesus to remember him.

• After the Crucifixion, the disciples who unknowingly traveled with Jesus, learned from Jesus, only really saw Jesus after the road to Emmaus, when he broke bread with them in Luke 24.

• The apostles had their eyes opened, from their latent nationalism, after the resurrection, when they were taught by Jesus for the forty days.

In your baptism God is accomplishing all those things that I just mentioned: he is granting you the ability to be partakers, to be delivered from the power of this world, be translated into the reality of the Kingdom of God, which is both now and in the future, and receive the forgiveness of sins.

Fellow baptized Christians; did you know that you get to see the Christ?

• You see him in your fellow Christian, for Jesus is the head of the body which is the church—the gathered believers in Christ. One another, we are all part of the same system. So, it is good you are here!

• You see him in Holy Communion. You are shortly invited to, like the thief, recognize where you are guilty under the weight of your sins, sorry for where you have sinned, that you cannot save yourself, and ask for the grace of God to assist you in amendment of life. He will forgive you. And in preparing yourself this way you are, like the thief, brought into the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Through the Holy Spirit which he sent so that we can be in the presence of not just the crucified Christ, but the resurrected Christ, who gives us more than we ask for. In the Prayer Book liturgy, we ask that in communion "he may dwell in us, and we in him."

Holy Communion is a divine drama, where in his mutual indwelling, we participate in the great dance of Heaven. We approach God, ask for him to be present to us through the Holy Spirit, and there he is! In partaking of Holy Communion, Christians invite Christ to dwell in them, to let "Jesus take the wheel" of their subconscious, helping them to see, to become more holy.

This is a model for the ritual of celebration in heaven, which was given in the garden, to Israel, to the Church, and which will continue when Jesus again comes to renew all things in the new heaven and new earth, reconciling them to himself, some the way of the repentant thief, some the way of the mocking thief. For those who seek to be the former, Jesus invites you to talk with him, to dwell with him.

St Ambrose said again of the repentant thief:

"Life consists in dwelling with Jesus Christ, and where Jesus Christ is there is his Kingdom"

Amen.