

A Proper 29
20 Nov 2011
Matthew 25.31-46 RCL

Justice and Mercy, Judgment and Completion

Jesus had a finely tuned sense of the end of time, not surprising since He was a devout Jew. Jews had and have a sense of time as linear, with a beginning, middle, and end. This contrasts with most world cultures which have a sense of time as endlessly cyclical, natural, I suppose, in a world in which season succeeds season, year after year, going, seemingly, nowhere.

Ancient Jews knew that history is a story, the story of God's way with Her creation, a story that is mounting toward a great climax at the end of time, the completion of God's design in the world. Christians and modern Jews, as daughter religions of ancient Judaism, also share this sense of things going somewhere, of purposeful history.

At the end of our own cycle, the liturgical cycle, the Church's year, we hear Jesus tell a story about the climax of time, the end of the world, and God's judgment, exercised through His Christ, on good and evil. We'll hear some Bible readings with the same theme next Sunday as we begin another church year; in a sense, we are knitting one year to the next with a seamless story. The story says that God has a purpose in creation, that God cares about good and evil, mercy or indifference, that there is an ultimate justice for our race and for us individually, and equally as important, that there is mercy for us as well. In making sense of our lives and of our God, we need to hear each of these aspects of reality.

We need to hear our religion declare that there is a purpose to life. In a world that does not know purpose on its own, we declare God's message that the universe is meant to show forth the beauty and wonder of its creator, even more than a painting or sculpture or novel or poem show forth the beauty of the artist. God is an artist, creating loveliness and joy in never-ending creatures through the wonder of time and space and other dimensions of reality. The means are limited and passing away; the objects of God's affection are, like Himself, not capable of ending, because that is what God wants. Time and space will someday end, but not the persons that they have nurtured – those persons last forever. Scientists tell us that the universe will eventually die and become a cold, lifeless husk. Saints tell us that what God treasures most, the creatures most like Himself in knowing and loving and willing and giving – these will live with God forever. That is not a scientific truth, to be verified through experimentation and replication. It is a spiritual truth to be verified through trust and love. Eventually these two ways of knowing will fuse into one in the completed and fulfilled persons that will come from God's ultimate judgment.

God cares about good and evil, and that is what justice is all about, justice with all its sharp corners and uncomfortable truths. God wants the best for Her creatures here and hereafter, and God demands that every creature take part with Him in that celebration of life and love. That's part of what you and I are all about: we are called by God to be good and not to be evil. Good is the fullness of all that can be, and evil is the absence of that good. When we do evil, we are practicing the art of living in a vacuum, no air, no food, no warmth, no sustenance of any kind; when we do evil, we are dying. When we are good, when we do good, when we make actual what God has given us the potential to be, then we are growing into the joy and wonder that we are meant for. One way lies emptiness and death; the other way lies fullness and life. That is why God is so big on justice. Goodness has a great effect upon God's

creation. That's what Jesus' parable in today's gospel reading means. God cares; things matter; lives grow; loves strengthen. Let us hear the call to goodness. It is what we are meant for.

But God is the Ultimate Realist and knows that for us Mercy must always accompany Justice. We are poor, incomplete, broken creatures. We intend evil and far too often succeed. We intend good and far too often fall short. We are a mixed bag, we creatures of spirit and matter, soul and time, person and space. We get it partially right, but always something is awry. So forgiveness and mercy must also be a part of our reality. God has enfleshed Himself in mercy in Jesus of Nazareth. God has become our best friend in Jesus, our accompanist, our leader, our pioneer, the one we can always count on. When we have gone astray from the flock, God in His Christ comes to shepherd us back home to safety and love.

In Jesus is where justice and mercy come together. Some people bridle at the idea that Jesus died for us; I prefer to think of Jesus as dying with us. God in Jesus set Himself to erase all the lack in our souls and to fill the space with love and mercy. Judgment is not an aspect of justice to be feared, but rather an aspect of mercy to be welcomed. God's judgment unerringly goes to the emptiness that mars our lives, whispers in our ear that that is not good enough for us, and then fills the emptiness with Herself, with goodness and joy and wonder and beauty and love beyond our wildest imagining.

Judgment, then, is certainly to be welcomed. There is a sternness in it, as we see in Jesus' parable, for God really cares about our being good. Yet the parable does not tell the whole story, for the left-hand folk have been died for, died with, resurrected for, resurrected with. God's justice and mercy are one.

How then should we live? What difference does this make? I think all the difference. Justice and judgment give eternal implication to our every action. Our triumphs cause God to rejoice. Our failures cause God to weep.

So we need to be on the side of rejoicing, for God and for ourselves. So let us forgive to our best, sacrifice without counting, love to our fullest, for God is pleased when we show ourselves to be so like Him. Neither should we despair at our failings, at our sins, at our falling short, for God has met that lack as well.

Justice and mercy have met. Righteousness and compassion have kissed. We are called to judgment and to completion. Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice. Amen.