

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, November 8, 2020

Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20

Psalm 70

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

Samuel Taylor Coleridge once wrote, “He who keeps watch and ward for freedom has to guard against two enemies; the despotism of the few and the despotism of the many.” The Friend I 94

On this Veterans Day Weekend, we remember all those who have served this country in all the wars and conflicts down the years. Back home we call it Remembrance Sunday and remember particularly all those who gave their lives in that service but here we remember all who served and survived also.

As we witness the working out of a significant decision in our national life it is appropriate that, as we do so, we remember all those who fought, and in so many cases died, to watch and ward that freedom we enjoy against both the despotism of the few and the despotism on the many.

No doubt people on different sides of the political divide will have different views as to who the despotic few and the despotic many are, but perhaps we can hope that the remembrance of our veterans sacrifice and service may give us all pause to reflect that it was not for one part of our society or one group that they gave these things, but rather for all of us that we might live together in freedom, peace and mutual respect. If I think of my parents who were part of the so called, greatest generation, (I think they would have found that description somewhat embarrassing actually) and I wonder what they would make of some of the things going on around us today, I can still hear my mother saying “I may deplore your opinion and everything you say, but we fought a war to defend your right to say it.” Can we say the same in our day?

The Saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God.
And the Beloved
Has just made such a fantastic Move
That the saint is now continually
Tripping over joy
And bursting out with laughter
And saying, "I surrender!"

Whereas, my dear,
I am afraid you still think
You have a thousand serious moves
Still to make.

Hafiz 14th C Persian Poet

"The Queens Gambit" is new series on Netflix that tells the tale of a young orphaned girl who becomes a chess prodigy in the 1960's. She battles drug addiction and alcohol dependency to become a world champion at a time when almost no women played chess at all at any level. It's well done and satisfying on a number of levels.

What is clear, I think, is that, as Aldous Huxley once said, the chess board is like the world in miniature, a complete universe in itself. Symbolically, every game is a silent battle to the death and in each game the players are weighed in the balance and come under judgment.

This might be a little too much chess for most of us, but in a painting called "The Chess Players" by the German 19th Century artist Friedrich Moritz Retzsch the devil is seen to be playing chess against a young man for his soul. The young man is just realizing that he is going to lose and the Devil is gloating watching him.

A real 19th Cent American chess prodigy, Paul Morphy, who by the age of 22 had beaten almost all the great players of his day, looked at the painting and said that he could beat the Devil for the young man. They set up the position on a board and Paul Morphy beat a number of people from that position. Sometimes, the most hopeless positions are not as hopeless as they look.

In this morning's Gospel we have the parable of the wise and foolish maidens. It is a tough story and one that introduces one of the themes that we will soon focus on in Advent - namely Judgement. The coming of the Bridegroom is, of course, symbolic of the second coming of Christ at the end of all things and the entrance into the wedding feast of the wise maidens and the banishment and exclusion of the foolish ones are a representation of the great judgement of God.

God's Judgement is, from one perspective, a stark and frightening thing.

It is final. Once the door is shut, it cannot be opened again. The only response the foolish virgins get is "I do not know you." Like a game of Chess, as long as the game is in process, the player always has choices, but once the check mate is made, there are no more choices.

The foolish maidens remind us also that the choices we make, or fail to make can leave us lost and unprepared. It is far too late for a student to be preparing when the day of the examination has come. It is too late for a soldier to train when the enemy is attacking. It is too late for a man to acquire a skill, or a character, when he is being put to the test. Similarly, it is easy to leave things so late that we can no longer prepare ourselves to meet with God. Princess Mary of Orange, who was the eldest daughter of Charles 1 of England who was beheaded by the Parliamentarians in the Civil War. When she was dying, her chaplain began to tell her of the way to salvation. Her answer was: "I have not left this matter to this hour." She had not left too late what is most important of all. She was ready to die.

The foolish maidens also warn us that there are certain things which cannot be borrowed. They found it impossible to borrow oil, when they discovered they needed it. A man cannot borrow a relationship with God; he must possess it for himself. A woman cannot borrow a character; she must be clothed with it. You and I cannot rely on the faith of our spouse or the reputation of our family to pass our own tests in life. I still remember the men in the mining community I used to visit in Scotland whose wives came to Church but who never came themselves. "Aye, that's my Church" they would say. "But you never come!" I would reply. "Och yes, I know, but the wife goes for us both", they would say. But some responsibilities cannot be delegated.

God's judgement is not terrible for the wise maidens, however. On the contrary, the judgement is joy to them. They were prepared in time and they were not just waiting but ready. As the 14th Century Persian chess poem sets out, the saint rejoices in the judgement - even though they have not won the game with God.

That the saint is now continually
Tripping over joy
And bursting out with laughter
And saying, "I surrender!"

Here is a different view of judgment. One that is not about winning or losing but rather about surrender. We cannot match God in intellect or goodness or in anything else for that matter, but we can rejoice in playing the game with him and admire his incredible moves and majestic plan. When we lose, we are made better and stronger by what we have learned and by playing with the one who made the game and us for his delight and ours.

In this earthly game we play every four years, whenever the result finally becomes clear we rejoice that our candidate has won or we fall back in sorrow that ours did not. In either case, we know that this judgement of our fellow citizens is fragile and temporary, just as ours is, but it is also precious and something most worth defending.

We, as Christians, however, are also aware that we are players on a much more important board. As we saw in Jesus on the cross, victory and defeat are all wrapped up together in God's greater game. In this game, it is not about winning or losing. It is about being ready to play whatever position God has for us to play. Our veterans offered themselves up to deal with whatever their service might bring, including wounding and death. So, we, as Christians, offer ourselves up to play whatever part God has for us to play, be it champion or martyr, winner or loser, or walk on extra in a game we don't even understand. Like the young man staring at the board of his life, at what he thinks is an utterly hopeless position, we sometimes need help, either to see a way to win or a way to lose that does not lose our very selves.

In the days ahead, who knows what moves will be required of us. Who knows what might be lost and won. In God's great game, all that is required of us is that we are ready to play our part as best we can. Empires may rise and fall. Our own houses may rise and fall, but we may still cheat the devil of his prize if we seek to follow the moves of Jesus Christ. Moves that may well lead through defeat before we ever see the light of victory on the horizon, but moves that will lead us to the Father regardless of what service or sacrifice may be required of us.

In the days ahead I pray for all of us, that we may step back and ask ourselves every day what move Jesus would have us make so that, whatever chaos may or may not form around us, we may be ready and equipped when he taps us on the shoulder and points to a move we barely understand.