

## The Point of Impact

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown  
Washington, D.C.  
November 22, 2020 / Last Sunday after Pentecost

by Andrew A. Kryzak

*Ephesians 1:15-23*

*Matthew 25:31-46*

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you have been thinking to yourself over the past few weeks that the Sunday-morning readings have taken a decidedly dark and foreboding turn, then I have good news for you: You're not crazy. You're not imagining it.

Two weeks ago, we heard the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, half of whom ran out of lamp oil, and as a result found themselves – unhappily – shut out of the wedding banquet.<sup>1</sup> Last week, it was bad news for the servant who buried his talent in the ground and failed to earn a profit for his master: he was thrown into the outer darkness.<sup>2</sup> And this week? The sheep are separated from the goats, and the goats sent into the eternal fire, as our Lord judges the nations at the end of all things.

What we have been hearing, week by week throughout November, is Jesus' final teaching before his arrest and death, his final message to his disciples on this side of the grave. It's very easy to remember back to All Saints' Day and think of the meek, the poor in spirit, and the pure in heart, and all of them inheriting the earth. But it's slightly more sobering to hear from Jesus that there's a flip side to that coin, that there's an iron fist inside the velvet glove.

One of the points I think we should take from these rather dire warnings is that *there is a lot at stake*. Do you believe that? Do you believe that your soul hangs in the balance? A good many Christians pay lip service to the ultimate concerns of the Christian faith, while at the same time operating for all practical purposes as if Christian virtue, ethics, and living is just a veneer covering the hard realities of power, of dollars and cents. But this morning we really can't escape the question: Do you believe that how you lead your life has ultimate meaning, to God, to you, or to anyone else?

It is appropriate that we should be asking such a question as we stand here, as the days grow shorter and we find ourselves very much on the precipice. There are so many unknowns ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25:1-13

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:14-30

With promising vaccines in late-stage trials, when will we emerge from this season of dislocation and fear? Will the world look different after the coronavirus than it did before? Will things we love have been irretrievably lost? We are betwixt and between, aren't we, living between what has been and what is not yet, an experience only amplified by pandemic and lockdown. The fragility of the human condition has perhaps never in our lifetimes been on more vivid display.

As Christians, we should understand something of what it feels like to be caught in the middle of forces much larger than we are. The whole of the New Testament describes Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as a collision between the might and majesty of God himself and the principalities, the powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness.<sup>3</sup> The field of battle where these two great powers meet is this world, our world, the same world in which we lead our lives, day in and day out, a world that has been caught in the grip of Sin and Death since the serpent first tempted Adam and Eve with the fruit of the tree, and they did eat.

One of the things we learn from that story – and there are many – is that the significance of what seem to be little actions on our part is usually invisible to us. What could it have mattered, eating from the tree? It was just a piece of fruit. You don't have to believe in a literal serpent talking to two naked people in a garden to understand the anthropological, theological, and cosmological heft of the story: not only are there costs to our actions, but we are caught up in a web of forces, of cause and effect, of interests, authorities, policies, and powers the full scope of which we only dimly comprehend.

One of the things we should notice about this morning's Gospel is that those on the Lord's right hand, when handed the "the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world," seem to be caught completely off guard! "Lord," they say, "when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?"<sup>4</sup> We may assume that those at his left hand are equally dumbfounded about when they *failed*. Neither group recognized the Lord in the faces of the hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison; neither group recognized the full scope of their actions.

This lesson is a wake-up call from Jesus to his disciples, and it is a wake-up call to us as well. Unlike the sheep or the goats in the story, we have heard the gospel; we have heard the message that we are to "love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart, and with all [our] soul, and with all [our] mind;" and we are to "love [our] neighbor as [ourselves]."<sup>5</sup> We know what to do; we know that our lives DO have ultimate meaning to God, and we know that the lives of other

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<sup>3</sup> Para. Ephesians 6:12

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 25:37-38

<sup>5</sup> Communion Service, Book of Common Prayer (1979), 324.

people do as well. It is tempting to hear this all as mere moralizing on the part of Jesus, and some finger-wagging from yet another preacher in yet another pulpit. But the things we do in this life, the extent to which our thoughts, words, and deeds conform to the likeness of Christ and his commandments, is at the heart of the matter this morning. When we follow “the commandments of God and [walk] from henceforth in his holy ways,” our deeds are not only a sign of the coming kingdom of God; they are an *instance* of that kingdom, a triumph of the Good News over the power of Sin and Death, *right here, and right now*.

Several years ago, I was walking along Lexington Avenue in New York. It was a weekend afternoon about this time of year, and evening was falling. At the end of the block, a homeless man was slouched against a lamppost, a stained and crumpled coffee cup sitting in front of him with a few dollars poking out of the top. I didn’t then, and I still don’t, carry much cash, but that afternoon I had a few singles on me, and since it was chilly, my hands were in my pocket, so I knew that they were there. Right ahead was this man and his coffee cup, and between my fingers was the cash. As I approached the corner, I could see that the man was asleep; he didn’t motion to me, he wasn’t panhandling, so what happened next was entirely up to me. I got closer, with the coffee cup in sight, and my fingers tightened around the cash in my pocket. And when I got to the corner... I walked right past the man and went on my way. The light was with me, so I didn’t even have to stop.

I’ve thought about this encounter – or rather this missed encounter – a lot over the years. I had the cash on hand, which was unusual, and I was prepared to reach out and stuff it into the coffee cup. But I didn’t. Why not? What was the matter with me?

The simple truth is that ***I was embarrassed***. It’s not more complicated than that. Even though there was no one around, and the man was asleep, I was embarrassed. Embarrassed by my good fortune, embarrassed by his poverty, embarrassed by the gulf between us.

Those of us who are deeply indebted to the world for our good fortune, if we haven’t been totally overcome by cynicism, are embarrassed by encounters such as these, because it is an embarrassing thing to recognize the humanity of another person, embarrassing to acknowledge our shared station as children of God across that chasm.<sup>6</sup> In that man, slumped against the lamppost on the corner of 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and Lexington Avenue, the kingdom of God was knocking at the door of my heart; our Lord Jesus Christ himself was asking for admittance, and I did not let him in. I was firmly in goat territory.

It is for this reason that the apostle writes to the Ephesians in our second lesson this morning, and he prays for them. He prays that “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of

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<sup>6</sup> One thinks here of Luke 16:19-31.

your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.” That enlightenment is what tips the scales in the human heart, the thing that allows each of us to declare for Jesus Christ, what allows the powers of Sin and Death to be dispelled and new life given to us. As St Paul writes, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.”<sup>7</sup>

On this particular Sunday, we have come to a crossroads. For us, it is the last Sunday after Pentecost, the end of the Church year.<sup>8</sup> Next week we begin again with Advent. But it is a punctuation mark for our Lord in St Matthew’s gospel as well, as he leaves his followers with a final lesson. Two days after declaring that the Son of man will come in glory, Jesus will hang on the Cross. But our Lord’s crucifixion was not the end of the story. For those of us living on the other side of Easter, as we now do, this story is a reminder of the power of the resurrection over the forces of darkness and deprivation. The battle is won, but the skirmishes continue, and in that mêlée the Christian soul hangs in the balance. When the chips are down, where will you be? Whose banner will you follow and who will be your king? In the person of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God has collided with the forces of Sin and Death, and the point of impact is *always* the place where Christians make their stand.<sup>9</sup>

And so I pray that you may always have the spirit of wisdom and revelation as our Lord knocks at the door to your heart, in those unremarkable moments, when you might not even know it is he. With the eyes of your heart enlightened, may you know the hope to which he has called you, this day, and always.

AMEN.

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:11

<sup>8</sup> The feast of Christ the King, which does not appear as a feast in the Prayer Book, was made up by the Roman Catholic Church in 1925, largely for political reasons having to do with the Pope’s temporal authority in the context of Italian reunification. For generations of faithful Anglicans, however, this day was known as the *Sunday next before Advent*, indicating its role as the gateway into the most significant season of the church year.

<sup>9</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once & Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 266.