

## **Christ the King A 2020**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 22, 2020

Matthew 25:31-46; Ephesians 1:15-23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, there will only be a few people in Times Square to watch the countdown and the famous Ball Drop. It will happen. But without the crowds. Like so much of the year 2020, the New Year's Eve Celebration will be live streamed.

The Church year comes to an end today, Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, is the beginning of the Church's new year. The Church year essentially tells a story. There is a beginning and an end. Christ the King is the end of the story. The end of a story is important because it gives meaning to what has taken place before. It's very important. From the greatest literature to the cheesiest cartoons, the ending is what gives meaning. If the villain is punished at the end, then that means that the universe has a moral order. If the villain gets away with it at the end, then that means that there is no moral order in the universe.

Stories are often divided into comedies and tragedies. This means that there is a misunderstanding early in the story. And at the end of the story, the misunderstanding is cleared up. And that can be a very joyful thing. If so, we call it a comedy. If the revelation of the truth is a sorrowful thing, we call that a tragedy. My English teachers taught me that this pertained to Sophocles and Aristophanes. And especially Shakespeare. My teachers did not tell me that it applied to the story of the ugly duckling. That's a comedy. The baby swan is mistakenly assumed to be a duck. A very ugly duck. When the truth is revealed, the swan is united with its own kind, and is celebrated for its rare beauty. It's a comedy. Not a "ha-ha" comedy. But a comedy in the classic sense of a happy ending.

My English teachers did not teach me that "The Planet of the Apes" was a tragedy. I'm talking about the 1968 original, with Charlton Heston. An astronaut who lands on a planet in which primates have enslaved human beings. At the end, he comes across the wreckage of the Statue of Liberty. Which means that the horrible planet that he had landed on was actually earth. The truth, when it comes out clearly, is devastating. Classic tragedy.

The Bible itself has an ending in the book of Revelation. Although the Apocalypse itself is full of turmoil and suffering, the book could be correctly deemed a comedy. Most of the suffering is caused by Satan and his spawn, and when they are finally identified and defeated, there is a great outpouring, and a great integration of the living and the dead, the sea and the land, the garden and the city, mathematics and beauty, heaven and earth. Revelation, like Isaiah in the Old Testament, envisions a wholeness, a completion, an integration. The binary oppositions that create conflict are revealed to be an illusion. Classic comedy ensues. *“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”* [Isaiah 11:6-7]

The parable of Jesus in today’s gospel is unusual in that it is both a comedy and a tragedy. Everyone is surprised at the end of the story. When the truth is revealed, both sides ask, “When?” “When did we see you?” Both sides are surprised by the answer. The answer reveals who is truly worthy, and who is truly unworthy. As is typical for Jesus’ parables in the first gospel, there is reward and punishment. The universe is shown to indeed be morally constructed. The villains do not get away with it. The aim of the parable is not to focus upon our own salvation, our own status as sheep or goats. The aim of the parable is to turn our attention “to the least of these.” If the end of the story gives meaning to everything that has gone before, then what matters is working and living with attention to “the least of these.”

The varying gospel readings on Christ the King Sunday all focus upon what *kind* of king Jesus is, and what *kind* of kingdom. In year A, today, Jesus is a king whose concern is with the least and the lowest. In year B, next year’s gospel, Jesus tells Pontius Pilate that his own kingdom is not from here. Not of this world. It is a spiritual kingdom. Finally, in year C, Jesus is seen as a king by a criminal, while they hang side by side on crosses, sentenced to death. The gospels assigned each year to Christ the King Sunday describe a different kind of king, and a different kind of kingdom.

But the principal reason for observing Christ the King Sunday is to celebrate an ending to the story, this story, the story of Jesus. And thereby point to the ending, the destiny, of all of history. Endings are what give meaning to all that has gone before. And I suggest— I daresay— that from the various endings suggested by our Bible, in its prose and in its poetry, there will be more comedy than tragedy when we reach the end. The things that perplex us. The things that divide us. The things that terrify us. May turn out to be shadows and mists that fade away in the morning sunshine.

Martin Luther King, Jr., borrowed a phrase from the great American clergyman and philosopher Theodore H. Parker. Here is that quote in its original form: *“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”* [Ten Sermons, 1853] Parker was talking about slavery and justice. But his words apply to a broader context. We can’t understand the universe. We can’t see much of it. But the story of Jesus tells us that the universe has meaning.

In our second lesson today, we read: *With the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.* That’s what today is about. With the eyes of our heart, not the eyes in our head. We may know the hope: That our lives have purpose. Our struggles are not in vain. And although we can’t comprehend it all, or predict it all, the promise of Christ the King for us is that it all ends in goodness. Amen.