

Micah 3:5-12

Psalm 43

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

Sermon for November 5, 2023

THE CHOICE TO BE HUMBLE aka THE MIRROR OF CHRIST

By Rev. Dr. DonAlgeo

The concluding verses of our Gospel selection for today teach us that the greatest among Christ's followers will be the servants, that whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted, and this is something we've heard from Jesus many times before, on many different occasions. Luke tells us how Jesus once took a little child by the hand and pointed to the child as an example for his followers, saying: For he who is least among you all will be great (9: 48) And Luke quotes Jesus on another occasions settling a dispute among his disciples about their relative status by saying: The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them...but not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.”(22:26) “Many who are first will be last, and the last first”(Matt 19: 13) he teaches on another occasion, and again, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”

And of course, Jesus manifested that same lesson in his own life; he had no place to lay his head, he washed the feet of his disciples, at the end, he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, he was born into the humblest of circumstances in the humblest of families, and he died, penniless and naked and friendless on a cross. As he himself once succinctly expressed it: The son of man came not to be served, but to serve.

We have pointed out many times that this instruction of our Lord's must never be taken to mean that somehow there will be a literal role-reversal in heaven that kings will become commoners and commoners kings; that ditchdiggers will become Presidents while presidents will wash dishes; or that generals will become foot soldiers while

privates will direct armies. Whatever else may be true of heaven, we can be pretty sure there are no White Houses there, or armies, or Politburos, or Buckingham palaces, complete with throne rooms.

But if he wasn't saying anything like that, then what was Jesus talking about in these many different images, on these many different occasions?

It has long been my contention that at least part of what Jesus was teaching was that, in eternity, people will appear, and be recognized as, what they really are. The qualities that truly define us, the qualities that have coalesced over the years of our earthly lives into the true reality of who we are -- the wickedness, the kindness, the generosity, the peevishness, the envy, the greed, the courage, the patience, the humility, the pride -- these qualities will somehow be apparent to all, because all will now be able to see in the way that Jesus sees.

Paul expresses what I think is that same expectation when he writes to the Corinthians: *When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.* (1 Co 13 : 11-12)

In our Gospel selection for today, Jesus reveals his meaning in the context of a criticism of the Pharisees. But what's important is not who he's criticizing, but what it is about them that he's criticizing. And what he was focused on in this particular occasion was the hypocrisy that was apparently commonly characteristic among them at least as a group.

So what is this hypocrisy? What is it that Jesus is teaching will so seriously handicap us in the realms of eternity?

The Greek word 'hypokritos' that we translate as hypocrite literally means an actor, I think that gives us our answer. A hypocrite is someone who, like an actor, is focused on putting on a costume, on assuming a character that has no relationship to true reality.

The lesson Jesus is teaching is that heaven is a place where the costumes and pretensions that we use here in this life to disguise our true character are removed, and what we truly are will be visible, will be apparent to all, and apparent even to ourselves. Heaven is where everything that is false and pretentious about ourselves will fall away, and where we will truly see ourselves and others as God sees us.

The Gospel writers emphasize on many occasions that Jesus could see through the masks we wear, through the lies we tell about ourselves, see through the parts we play in the dramas we author about ourselves. In Matt 9: 4 we read: But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, *'Why do you think evil in your hearts.'* Luke records the following: *And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him alongside.* Or again, John writes: *But Jesus did not commit himself to them, because he knew all men, and he had no need that anyone should testify of man, for he knew what was in man.*

In heaven, we begin the process of seeing as Jesus sees, We see through the pretense and the prideful posturing of others, as they see through the same things in ourselves. It will be a place of perfect transparency, of perfect understanding, of perfect truth.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

For many of us, those who have built our lives on the expectations of popular approval, of half-truths and sly innuendo, of rationalization, of self-centeredness disguised as meekness and humility...heaven on first encounter may seem like a harsh and unrewarding place. That is Jesus' concern; that is what he came to spare us. That is always the heart of his instruction to us: to prepare us to appreciate what heaven has to offer, to thrive on what heaven has to provide for nourishment and reward.

Our task here in this life is to begin to set aside pretension, to set aside the masks we wear and the costumes we don, the opinions we espouse for the sake of getting along or impressing others. Our task instead is always to remain singularly focused on the true reality of our lives, that reality that will one day be evident to all.

A narrative device that you often find in fairy tales and other morality stories is the magic mirror. Sometimes the magic mirror shows the past, sometimes the future, sometimes what might have been. Suppose you had a magic mirror, and every time you looked into it, the reflection you would see would be, not of your physical appearance, but of the reality of your spirit. Suppose what we saw was the faithful image of the spirit that will someday pass through the Pearly Gates and present itself for inspection before the hosts of heaven. I suspect that for many of us, certainly for myself, what we see in that mirror would be a very humbling experience indeed, and a motivation for change.

The fact is, my friends, we do have such a mirror. Here it is. Our magic mirror is Jesus Christ.

And so our prayer for today is that we may have the courage to look into that mirror, that we may have the honesty to accept its image as the image of who we really are, that we may have the strength to begin the never-ending task of changing that reality into the likeness of our Lord and Savior, In whose name we pray.