

We have in today's gospel a story – part parable, part allegory – which turns our minds towards the last things: Heaven Hell, Death and Judgement – and particularly death and judgement. It fits in, of course, with the month of November in which we pray especially for the Dead, it fits with Remembrance Day this coming Wednesday, and in the northern hemisphere – not so much with us in the Antipodes – it even fits with the weather!

The wedding-feast is a common allegory in scriptures for the destiny of the just in heaven, and the bridesmaids are ten disciples – all of whom, you notice, grow drowsy because the Lord is taking so long to come. The difference is that some are prepared, some are ready – and others are not. Someone once commented – inaccurately – that its message could be summed-up in a joke:

The good news is: Jesus is coming.
The bad news is: boy, is he mad!

We may laugh a little uncomfortably because we know that there is more than a little truth in that joke. Two thousand years after his birth, there is a lot that would appal our Saviour were he to return today. We are a long way indeed from that *peace on earth* of which the angels sang, even in that very city of Bethlehem.

That great hymn the *Dies Irae*, which was part of the traditional Mass for the Dead, and which still figures in the Breviary as a hymn for the last week of the Church's year – views the Lord's return with more than a little trepidation:

Quantus tremor est futurus	How great shall be the trembling
Quando Iudex est venturus	When the Judge shall come
Cuncta stricte discussurus.	Strictly to investigate all things.

Those who have suffered at the hands of the torturers and war-makers, or who have perished of hunger or disease simply through indifference to their plight, may well rejoice that a just judge is at last to come. But the Lord's coming is something to fear for those who have perpetrated injustice, or simply closed their eyes to it. I am reminded of the poignant gravestone in an old parish graveyard in England, which read: "Here lies an unknown man, who perished of hunger in this parish on Christmas Day, 1656. Resurgam." "Resurgam!": "I

shall arise!” That one Latin word on the gravestone is both a cry of hope and a warning – almost a threat – to the wicked and indifferent.

If the *Dies Irae* stopped there, however, it would not be a Christian hymn. Rather, it goes on:

Recordare, Jesu pie,
Quod sum causa tuae viae
Ne me perdas illa die.

Remember, loving Jesus,
I am the cause of your journey
Do not lose me on that day!

For this is the extraordinary claim of Christians: that *God saved us while yet we were sinners*, and saved us by becoming one of us. This is the secret, *hidden from the learned and the clever and revealed to mere children* in the words of today's gospel, this is the *rest* that we *who labour and are heavy burdened* are promised. God has entered our world, and wants to enter our lives. Between that first coming of Jesus at Bethlehem and his final return in glory, the Lord is constantly seeking to enter your life and mine. Remember, loving Lord, that *I* am the cause of your journey ... If I am willing to allow God in, there is the source of my hope - whatever my sinfulness.

Qui Mariam absolvisti,
Et latronem exaudisti,
Mihi quoque spem dedisti.

You absolved Mary Magdalene
and heard the robber's plea:
thus have you given me hope.

Jesus comes to us each day to *transform our lives* - I say “transform” because if Mary Magdalene and the Good thief on the Cross became signs of hope to the author of the *Dies Irae*, so we, you and I, can be sources of hope in our world - and especially to our children.

Like the child in a manger whom Herod saw as a threat, like the King who chose a cross for a throne, we will only be that sign of hope if we are, in the eyes of the world, a sign of contradiction.

When there is angry or disdainful talk about people of other races, we can show ourselves as truly *Catholic* - that is, universal, where race and nationality are unimportant in comparison with our common kinship in Jesus Christ;

When society seems to value only money and material gain, we can be generous to others; we can put our education at the service of the poor; we can really value wisdom rather than pure knowledge;

When the deliberate choice of death is presented as the best answer to life's problems, whether in abortion, suicide or euthanasia, we can be defenders of human life, beginning, surely, with the lives of our children. Let us teach them that their worth comes not from what they produce, but from being made in the image and likeness of God. As St Irenaeus put it in a famous epithet: "The glory of God is a living human being - but the life of a human being is the vision of God!"

The vision of God! Nothing less is the destiny of a Christian man or woman. To keep that vision before our eyes is our hope. With that vision, we will not fear to answer the call of the trumpet which announces the arrival of the bridegroom, the call to trim our lamps and to meet our Just Judge.

*St Dominic's, Camberwell
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