

The Christian Hope - With an Edge

"At midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'" (Matthew 25:6)



Wake up and shake off those nightmares! No, I'm not referring to yesterday's election results. Jesus has finally arrived! He'll fix the mess we're in.

Today's scriptures are all about what is often called the Second Coming, the end times. Jesus tells us that after a period of terrible suffering and false prophets,

All the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:30-31)

He then uses the parable of the bridesmaids to illustrate how this new age of God's reign will unfold. Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, arrives deep in the night, gathering us into the light of God's eternal wedding banquet.

The faithful Thessalonians, who had been expecting Christ's immanent return, were worried that their members were starting to die waiting for him. Paul, with the certainty of one who had actually seen the risen Lord, assures the church that

The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

In today's Old Testament reading, God has at long last brought Joshua and the Israelites back home to Canaan, the land originally given by God to Abraham. There, at Shechem, God renews his covenant with his people as they enter the new unending age of life in the promised land.

The coming of Christ at the end of history is a central doctrine of our faith. It's affirmed in our creed: *"He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."* (BCP p.358) The church anchors our hope in Christ's sure return. This is from our catechism in the Book of Common Prayer:

Q. *What is the Christian hope?*

A. *The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world. (BCP p.861)*

My friends, if there were ever a time when I have so needed to hold onto this Christian hope, it is now.

And yet. And yet... There is a distinct edge to the way this Second Coming could unfold. The foolish, unprepared bridesmaids were shut out of the banquet because they

had not brought enough oil to keep their lamps lit. Oh, they pounded on that door: "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." (Matthew 25:11b-12)

Joshua warned the Israelites that even though the Lord has brought them into the Promised Land, if they turn away from him it will not end well: "If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." (Joshua 24:20)

On that day long ago, the Israelites did choose the Lord, and God renewed his covenant with them. He once again gave them the law, and over hundreds of years sent the prophets to remind, teach, admonish and guide them. Finally, God sent his own son to proclaim the law of love on which hang all the law and the prophets. Christ even became that law, dying on the cross and triumphantly rising from the dead. All in the name of love.

As Christians, the covenant in Shechem has been transformed into our baptismal covenant. Each time we renew our baptismal vows, we affirm our salvation in Christ, and our obligation to follow in his footsteps of love and forgiveness.

The Catechism describes heaven as "*eternal life in our enjoyment of God*" and hell as "*eternal death in our rejection of God*" (BCP p.862) - Those wise and foolish bridesmaids. While by the occasion of sin I have rejected God time and time again, it has never ever been possible for me to cut myself off from his tender mercy, his love, his grace. I'm not even sure it is possible. Whenever I fall, Jesus is there, extending a hand to lift me back up, hold me in his arms, heal my broken heart. Sure we may fall asleep at times, nightmares [like 2020] darkening the fire of our lamps. But I don't believe we will ever run out of oil. By our anointing with holy chrism, we have been "*sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.*" (BCP p.308) "Truly I tell you," we are intimately known and deeply loved by God. As the psalmist sings:

*For you yourself created my inmost parts; *
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will thank you because I am marvelously made; *
your works are wonderful, and I know it well. (Psalm 139:12-13)*

Heaven is *eternal life in our enjoyment of God*. It is our natural state to bask in the love of our creator. We have been made to enjoy God. And to share our enjoyment by the light of our lamps.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, elections come and go, but the final victory is certain. Love wins. Today and forever. Welcome each other into the wedding banquet. Take delight that in Christ, all things are being made new. Love and enjoy each other. For that is the taste of eternal life. Amen.