

TITLE: “The Prudent & the Prayerful”

“THE end of all things is at hand; be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.” The end is near. Be sober. Tell that to the crowd in the middle of a wedding feast, and you might just get yourself thrown out of the party. But, as we know, the Scriptures don't always tell us what we want to hear. The same was true of the Old Testament prophets. One day the King of Judah went to visit Ahab, the wicked king of Israel to get him to form a league together to fight against the Ammonites. They decided to ask the prophets if they should indeed make such an agreement. Of course, the prophets wanted to keep their high-status jobs, so they all prophesied that the two kings would have great victory together. If they united, the whole world would be theirs. This seemed too good to be true, so the king of Judah asked Ahab, are there no other prophets who might disagree with these?

Ahab replied, “Well, yes, there is the prophet Micaiah, son of Imlah, but I hate him, because he is always prophesying doom and gloom, telling me I'm going to die or some other horrible thing.” Reluctantly, Ahab called in Micaiah, and when he spoke, I'm sure the king of Judah was surprised. After Ahab had spoken ill of him, Micaiah responded positively, “Go up and triumph; the Lord will give the city into the hand of the king.” Ahab knew Micaiah too well to believe that he would ever foretell of his success. So he said to Micaiah, “how many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?” So

Micaiah said, “I saw the Lord seated on his throne, and said to the host of angels, ‘who will go down and be a lying spirit to entice Ahab to go into battle that he might fall?’ Behold, God has put a lying spirit in the mouths of these your prophets because the Lord has declared disaster for you.” Ahab hated Micaiah because he hated to hear the truth. So, he had Micaiah thrown into prison, and he and the king of Judah went into battle, and it was a disaster. Ahab died in battle when a stray arrow hit him in the chest, right between the pieces of armor.

Years later another king of Judah, King Hezekiah, received a similar prophecy, from the prophet Isaiah. As the king lay sick in bed, Isaiah proclaimed, “Set your house in order, for you shall die. You will not get better.” Unlike Ahab, when Hezekiah heard this dire warning, he turned his head and wept bitterly and prayed to the Lord and pleaded with him that he might remember the good that he had done for God’s kingdom. And immediately, Isaiah turned back with another message. “Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father. I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day, you shall go up to the house of the Lord, and I will add fifteen years to your life.” Today Christ is teaching us that the end is near. The final chapter of humanity is drawing to a close, and he has called us to bear witness to this truth. The choice is either to listen and to wake up and pray, or to meet with disaster.

We hear a sobering message today, the Sunday after the Ascension, because Christ wants his Church to prepare for Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday. Christ has ascended into heaven, which means for him, the end has come. And if the end has come for the head, then surely the end will come soon for the body as well. The coming of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost is both the end and the beginning. It's the end of the Old Testament system. It's the giving of a new law, the law of the Spirit of Life written on the tablets of our hearts. Pentecost marks the end of the Temple and the Mosaic law of sacrifices and ceremonies. The sign of circumcision is now replaced with baptism, a baptism of water and of the Holy Ghost. Something new is going to happen when the Spirit of God descends upon the Church. Indeed, this will be the beginning of the end, a new creation, the creation of the body of Christ – God's body – on earth. So, be sober, and watch unto prayer, for the end has come, but this is just the beginning of the end.

In our lesson from St. John's Gospel, Christ tells his disciples, "WHEN the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning." You know, when I talk with people about current events, about the way things are going in our society right now, there's always a mixture of surprise and disappointment at just how quickly things have changed. I think it's pretty clear that God is sending us a wake-up call.

It's so clear that it's almost like it was spoken by a prophet, who says, "If you keep going down this path there will be no happiness, no freedom, only disaster." That is the "Gospel truth" as they say. And, the truth sometimes hurts. Especially when we realize that the world may not heed the warning, and things might get worse.

Christ says, "These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended." The Greek word being "skandalizw", "you should not be scandalized" or "be convinced that Christ's teachings were false". So, he warns them, "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that, when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them." This may not sound like a very comforting message, and perhaps it's not meant to be. He says the Comforter will come. For the disciples, he has not yet come. They have seen him come, as he descended in the form of a dove upon Christ at his baptism. That's why Christ tells them that they will bear witness "because they have been with him from the beginning." They will bear witness about Christ's divine identity and calling, that the Spirit of God dwells in him, and that the Father has called from heaven to proclaim him "my beloved Son."

But, the message today is that things might get worse before they get better. "But these things have I told you," he says, "that, when the time shall come, ye may

remember that I told you of them.” As the psalm says, “I will thank thee for giving me warning.” This is a sobering message. And isn’t that the point? Sobriety? Isn’t that the point of the Spirit of Truth, namely, that as the world around us becomes more and more intoxicated by the pleasures of this life, as they feast on their 24-hour entertainment, pornography, addiction to social media, living in a meta-verse, where create worlds for ourselves, in which we reign like virtual kings, while we have no care or concern for what’s happening to our neighbor outside? The time is coming, yea and now is, when people will begin to come to the Church, not for an affirmation of their twisted lifestyles, or to give them social clout in the community, but simply because they have heard that in the Church, they will be free, free to speak the truth without persecution, free to believe the truth, as two thousand years of Christians have always believed, free to live in the real world, even a world without end. Amen.

The Church is the place where a sobering message is preached by those endowed with the Spirit of Truth. We should give thanks to God for that sobering message, because it is none other than the message of life and peace and hope and freedom in the Lord. Christ has ascended into heaven. He has conquered death and overcome the world and all of its lies. And now that same Spirit by which he overcame the world is given to us. The Spirit of Truth from on high is poured into our hearts, interceding for us now in groans that words cannot comprehend, creating in our midst a fellowship of like-minded people who are not afraid to speak the truth,

who have no fear of what man can do or say about us, because we have no more concern for the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, but we have the faith that moves mountains, and the knowledge that that we can endure all things in Christ Jesus by dying, by breathing out our earthly breath, and drawing in the breath of God in the Spirit of Truth who dwells within us.

This is what it means to be sober and to watch unto prayer. It means to live a divine life, a life infused with the reality of eternity. In the Latin Bible it says, “Estote itaque prudentes et vigilate in orationibus.” Prudentes et vigilate. These words are very close to the English, “be prudent and vigilant.” Vigilance comes from the word “vigil”, which is a word for prayer conducted at a late hour, when you would normally be asleep. Prudence is sober-mindedness. To be prudent is to know the truth, to meditate on the truth, to live truly, by having a rule of life and a plan for both speaking and acting on that truth. The very centerpiece of that plan for knowing and acting on the truth, is spiritual vigilance, our daily meditation on the word of truth in Holy Scripture. Those who have received the Spirit of Truth and the gift of prudence, realize that Satan is daily seeking to twist the truth, telling us that if we really are Christians, and if we really love those for whom Christ died, then we must love their lifestyles, approve their sins, and pledge allegiance to their cause in the workplace, or at least remain silent so that we don’t lose our income.

The Spirit of Truth gives us prudence and wisdom to see beyond the lies, because we know that this world is full of deceit, but by the Spirit of Truth in our spirits, we look through the lies, to a better world. We know that the end is near, and that soon all of these things will pass away, and that the God who stretched out the heavens like a scroll, will soon roll them up again just as quickly as he said “Let there be light” and there was light. If the end is near, then why do we worry ourselves about the present moment? We have the Spirit of Truth, the God of all Creation, dwelling within us, so that we are a living Temple of God’s almighty power. We dwell already in the light of His eternal love. What else do we require from this life than that?

You may have heard this past week about the passing of Tim Keller, the well-known Christian author, preacher, and renewer of society, through his ministry at Redeemer Church in Manhattan. In one of his sermons Keller recalls a story by Tolkien called “Leaf Niggle.” In the story there is an artist, who wants to devote all of his time to painting, but he’s the kind of person who cares about every soul that he sees. So, time and time again, Niggle is drawn away from what would be his *magnum opus*, a grand mural of a tree, perhaps the Tree of Life. By the end of his life, he’s managed to paint only one leaf. But, when he gets to heaven, he sees that the tree he had hoped to paint is already there before him, already completed, finished well before he had ever taken up the paintbrush.

Keller reminds us that this is a picture of the Christian life. “[The] Christian realizes that his entire life he may only get one 'leaf' done of his beautiful vision...Nevertheless, we live with the hope that there will be a tree. There will be a city. There is going to be a just society. Beauty will be there. Poverty and war will be gone. We are not the saviours. Instead, hope can set us free from both the despair of nihilism and the naivety of utopianism.” This is what we have in the Church, in God’s free society of like-minded spirits, dwelling together, drawn together toward the center and the heart of all creation, by the Spirit of Truth, who in the beginning hovered over the creation, patiently abiding with it, pouring out the flame of God’s love and life into every creeping thing and every flowering bud. The sobering reality is not only that life is short, and we may only paint one leaf, but that, even if we only painted one leaf, it would be a reflection of something true and eternal, abiding forever in the heavens, and because of that, those few brush strokes would become, by hope, an eternal participation in God’s great work of art, in which all of are a portrait and a painting. Be sober, “prudentes”, and watch, “vigilate”, because Christ Jesus will come in the same way that we, by faith, have seen him ascend into the heavens, so that where he is, there we might be also.

As we come to Holy Communion, let us keep these things in mind, and pray that we might receive a greater measure of Christ’s spirit, the spirit of prudence and vigilance in prayer, that we might truly celebrate the Feast of Pentecost in spirit and



in truth. As we approach the altar, Christ approaches us in a great mystery. Though life is short and the prophet's message is sobering, let us give thanks to God for giving us warning. As one theologian says, "Away then with these sighs and tears, lament no longer the absence of thy Lord, for he is in this blessed [Eucharistic] feast...if he had not left you some little tastes of his sweetness, in the repast of this holy table...you could not have endured so long without him." Let us come here and receive Christ, truly present with us and in us, who said, "Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world." In the name...