

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
**Christmas Day (III); 25 December 2018**  
**St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster**  
(rev. 201812230945)

**Confidence before the Judge**

*In nomine...*

**I. Intro**

What caught me this morning was our Collect:

*O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

How do you like that, talking about our Judge on Christmas day! The term Judge, for most of us, has terribly negative connotations. We don't want to be judged. We know we don't measure up in various ways, and the coming of a judge makes us feel vulnerable and afraid.

But what I'm reminded of is a story I heard once about two priests who walked into a bar. I don't know if there was a bar involved, but it helps set the tone for the story. One priest, a white, male, middle-to-upper-class American, was talking about how challenging he found that week's readings because they were apocalyptic. Like the book of Revelation, or Daniel, or nearly any of the prophets. They spoke of judgment and punishment. And this priest, and the congregation to which he anticipated preaching, instinctively recoiled from such language.

The priest's companion was male, but not white or American. He was from Africa and he had known poverty in his life. This companion laughed at the first guy's complaint and said, "Ah, spoken like an American. For someone who has known poverty or discrimination or persecution, judgement is music to our ears. It promises the coming of justice and the righting of wrongs. When you're at the bottom, a shakeup in how things are means things are only going to get better."

## **II. Thesis**

Our first reading this morning is from the prophet Isaiah. And it's a joyful passage.

We see beautiful feet, we hear good news of salvation, we see sentinels singing for pure joy. We speak of comfort and redemption and all the nations – everyone – benefiting from God's loving presence.

Our Psalms is likewise joyful with a lot of the same themes, but even more poetic and filled with more robust musical accompaniment. There are whole lands singing, and harps and trumpets and horns and the music of the waters, each with their different voice.

And then the Psalm finishes with, "In righteousness shall he judge the world \* and the peoples with equity" (Ps 98.10).

## **III. Good News**

When is judgment good news? As our less naive priest above pointed out, judgement is good news for those who have been oppressed and who have nothing to lose. Judgement is good news when the judge is trustworthy and the laws are just.

Judgement is frightening when I'm living with a little bit of guilt. Judgement is frightening when I have benefited from unjust systems, perhaps through no conscious effort of my own, and somebody is trying to set things right. Judgement is frightening when a judge is corrupt, beholden to the rich and powerful rather than to the law and to the idea of justice.

At Christmas time we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who is just and true. He would rather die, he did in fact die, rather than compromise with injustice.

Gustavo Gutiérrez was a Latin American theologian who really developed the idea of God's "preferential option for the poor." It's an idea that flows pretty naturally, pretty easily from Scripture – from the whole Bible. Somehow the poor tend to be more receptive, more ready to encounter God. Poor economically, poor in spirit, poor in all kinds of ways. It was the tax collectors and prostitutes who gave Jesus the warmest welcomes in our Gospel accounts. We speak of baptism as surrender and the abandonment of every benefit and strength upon which we once relied. To pursue the Christian life is to pursue a kind of poverty that makes us ready to hear the coming of a Judge as good news. It is to voluntarily submit ourselves, to place ourselves, into the just and powerful care of that judge.

#### **IV. Invitation**

You don't go to a surgeon and submit to the scalpel without good reason. When I meet people having significant, traumatic surgeries I marvel at how much pain, physical or emotional, they have endured that brought them to the point where they would walk into the surgical center on their own two feet and surrender their life into a doctor's hands.

If you are coming to church from a place of strength, then good for you. Often I do that, too. But it is at church that we are being invited to lay down all those strengths and become like little children. Like an infant lying in a manger. Because it is as we discover our own weakness and inability, that we will begin to discern God's strength and care for us. It is then we will learn to welcome God's sovereignty over *our* lives, and rejoice in the coming of our judge and king.

As we trace the drama of Jesus' life over the next several months, culminating in the Ascension shortly after Pentecost, I invite you to constantly examine your own role in the drama. God could have come to us in power and judgement. Instead he chose a different route, the vulnerability and innocence of a child, to woo us to a similar path. May we follow in Jesus' footsteps and learn how to welcome the coming of our king.

Merry Christmas!

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