

The Sunday Missive -- July 31, 2022, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 65 Prepare the way O Zion

Prepare the way, O Zion, your Christ is drawing near!
Let every hill and valley a level way appear.
Greet One who comes in glory, foretold in sacred story.
O blest is Christ who came in God's most holy name.

He brings God's rule, O Zion; he comes from heaven above.
His rule is peace and freedom, and justice, truth, and love.
Lift high your praise resounding, for grace and joy abounding.

Fling wide your gates, O Zion; your Savior's rule embrace,
And tidings of salvation proclaim in every place.
All lands will bow rejoicing, their adoration voicing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJEBNa4PZE4>

The Collect of the Day

Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen.**

Ecclesiastes 1:2 - 2:23

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under

heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Psalm 49

Hear this, all you peoples* ***Hearken, all you who dwell in the world***

You of high degree and low* ***Rich and poor together***

My mouth shall speak of wisdom* ***My heart shall meditate on understanding.***

I will incline my ear to a proverb* ***And set forth my riddle upon the harp.***

Why should I be afraid in evil days* ***When the wickedness of those at my heels surrounds me***

The wickedness of those who put their trust in their goods* ***And boast of their great riches?***

We can never ransom ourselves* ***Or deliver to God the price of our lives.***

For we see that the wise die also* ***Like the dull and stupid they perish and leave their wealth to those who come after them.***

Their graves shall be their homes forever* ***Their dwelling places from generation to generation***

Though they call the very lands after their own names* ***They are like the beasts that perish; they cannot live forever.***

Hear this, all you peoples* ***O hearken, all you who dwell in the world!***

Colossians 3:1-11

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Hymn 510 Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove, with all thy quickening powers;
Kindle a flame of sacred love in these cold hearts of ours.

See how we trifle here below, fond of these earthly toys:
Our souls, how heavily they go, to reach eternal joys.

In vain we tune our formal songs, in vain we strive to rise:
Hosannas languish on our tongues, and our devotion dies.

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove, with all thy quickening powers;
Come, shed abroad a saviour's love, and that shall kindle ours.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmYrX638WM4>

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

A New Angle – Proper 13

Today we wrestle with one of the knottier problems of a thoughtful life. Time and again in scripture we are admonished to set aside earthly things, to refrain from storing up treasure, to live as disinterestedly as possible where physical and fiscal security are concerned. The problem is: if you count the number of otherwise admirable people who are able to effectively live in such a way, they add up to very few indeed.

Can it be that Our Father is unaware of the unlikelihood, not to say near-impossibility of our doing what he says? Naaah. Can it be that God is aware of the unlikelihood and is morbidly establishing for us an impossible paradigm? Gee I hope not. Then it must be that God is being literary rather than literal through the scriptures, and wants us to think, to feel and to be transformed through their study?

In the great tradition of the Anglican Church, let's take a look and a listen today to a range of thoughts, across centuries and faith traditions and literary styles at some of the attempts to express what it is God would have and help us become.

“Set aside earthly things.” Does this mean don't make a living? I should think a loving God would want us all happy, and happily employed. There should be a – oh I don't know – tofu faux chicken at least in every pot, a cheery fire and a rose bush or two, a blue room for two room, where almost every day's a holiday. Let's face it, Jesus exaggerates. We're not really supposed to hate our mothers and fathers in order to follow Him; we're not really supposed to give “no thought” to our lives either. Instead, we are supposed to develop our frame of reference, to continually reprioritize and redirect our lives in favor of love. No mean feat for us.

Here, from Robert Browning's poem, *Rabbi ben Ezra*:

Let us not always say, 'In spite of this flesh to-day I strove,
Made headway, gained ground upon the whole!'
As the bird wings and sings, let us cry,
'All good things are ours,
Nor soul helps flesh more now, than flesh helps soul!'

The critic Thom Hartmann begs the question: "Is the essential nature of humans to cooperate or to dominate, to have democracy or to have kingdom? If you talk to people in aboriginal and indigenous cultures, you find that the highest societal value is cooperation. Competition is of very low value, and competition beyond certain boundaries is considered mental illness. But if you look at our culture, cooperation is considered a relatively low value and competition is considered the highest value. We celebrate the most powerful competitors."

St. Paul gets heavily into hyperbole too, only without Jesus' empathic sense of irony. When we are confronted with Paul's lists of what not to do and how not to be, we can feel like we're being hectoring by an inflexible militant instead of taught by a sublime tale-spinner. And we can't help but qualify some of Paul's rules: "He just means the bad kind of passion, right, not all passion?" or "He just left 'there is neither male nor female' out of this particular letter by accident...right?" So what about his admonition to 'Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly?' Literally? That can't be right. How can we possibly put to death whatever is earthly within us? The flesh can help the soul as the soul can help the flesh. Move a muscle; change a thought.

Although Our Father in Heaven, so to speak, is not wholly disappointed with us, God is, as they say in those endless surveys, 'somewhat dissatisfied.' G.K.Chesterton was once asked to enter an essay contest wherein everyone had to answer the question, "What's wrong with the World?" His essay was two words long: "I am."

God will never be completely satisfied until our frame of reference changes from one of distracted pursuit of the fleeting and its adherent self-interest, to grateful connectedness and devotion to the nurture of Creation. Marc Barash writes: "You have to change your mind. You have to change your perceptions. If you change your perceptions, the world changes. Instead of, 'What do I get out of this?' it's 'How do I bring out the good that's in you?'"

With this transformed view, enough will be enough, and for that sufficiency we will be grateful. In the words of Thomas Merton, "To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything God has given us -- and God has given us everything. ...Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience."

Is this not what Paul has in mind when he tells us – rather precipitously -- "You have stripped off the old self with all its practices and have clothed yourselves with a new self, and are being renewed according to our creator for whom there is no longer Greek nor Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free; for Christ is all in all!"

Does this preclude the things that are of interest to us in this life? Far from it. God loves lots of what goes on in the World! The art music, cultural and intellectual inquiry of every kind must be pleasing indeed, because we come to them with an appetite for the godly and are both grateful for and gratified by each other's enjoyment. Looking at the world through our God-coloured glasses, we find what Karl Barth called 'the purely miraculous element which adheres in seeing the invisible things of God and understanding them by the things that are made by humankind and perceived in Nature. This is not a rational, obvious, self-evident procedure; it is of the nature of revelation.'

Mozart, for instance, one of Barth's favorite subjects, starts to look like this: "The golden sounds and melodies of Mozart's music

speak to me, not as Gospel, but as parables -- of the realm of God's free grace that is revealed in the Gospel – and they do so again and again with great spontaneity and directness.”

Or science itself, the greatest of all distractions for many a modern soul: “Faith in God the Creator frees us from all mythical interpretations of the world, and enables us to investigate scientifically the whole reality of nature and history that is open to our sense and reason, without falling victim to any ideology of science.” Forget Creationism; God would have us experiment with, discover and employ the wonders of science for peace, compassion, sustenance and sustainability.

Let's not kid ourselves, Jesus is adamant about excess wealth being a paralyzing poison to the kind of life God would have us lead. But a renewed relationship with God and our fellow living things, the refreshed point of view to which Jesus exhorts us will naturally lead away from excess. It is the distracting prioritization and idolatry of this world, not the enjoyment of it, that God would have us give up. Because God doesn't just want us to be happy and well for awhile, God wants us to be happy and well eternally.

Rule 22 of Shams Tabriz, the Sufi Dervish: “Life is a temporary loan and this world is nothing but a sketchy imitation of Reality. Only children would mistake a toy for the real thing. And yet human beings either become infatuated with their toys or disrespectfully break them and throw them aside. In this life stay away from all kinds of extremes; they will destroy your inner balance.”

These thinkers all seem to be telling us to walk through our lives as if godliness were possible in all things, that no human pursuit is worthwhile outside a context of love.

Let's give old Browning the last word on this topic:

All that is, at all, lasts ever, past recall;

Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure.
What entered into thee, *that* was, is, and shall be.
Time's wheel runs back or stops: the Potter and clay endure.
God fixed thee mid this dance of plastic circumstance;
This present, that thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant to give thy soul its bent, to try thee and
Turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

Hymn 655 O Jesus I have promised

O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end:
Be thou for ever near me, my Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle if thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me hear thee speaking in accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me, to hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen, thou guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, thou hast promised to all who follow thee,
That where thou art in glory there shall thy servant be;
And, Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my friend.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MzobkFzSZM>

Hours

I have known hours built like cities,
House on grey house, with streets between
That lead to straggling roads and trail off,
Forgotten in a field of green;
Hours made like mountains lifting
White crests out of the fog and rain,
And woven of forbidden music—
Hours eternal in their pain.
Life is a tapestry of hours
Forever mellowing in tone,
Where all things blend, even the longing
For hours I have never known.

Hazel Hall