

Reflections On Death

Wayne Waibel – 04/03/2022

As we move into the beginning of Holy Week with next week's Palm Sunday celebrating Jesus' triumphant procession into Jerusalem, we mark what is for us a most glorious and perplexing turn of events.

In the midst of all the storied versions and narratives surrounding the Passion and Crucifixion of our Lord, we have some very basic elements that are sometimes neglected, occasionally overlooked, and once in a while – misinterpreted.

Prior to our hurtling forward into the whirl of activity that informs this section of the church calendar, let's take a moment to reflect, examine, and perhaps gain some insight around one of the most commonly abused passages in Scripture.

.....

When Jesus responds to the Judas protest of Mary using expensive oil to anoint Him by saying, "The poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always," countless entities and program director's and even clergy have used this phrase to justify apathy for or inaction toward the poverty stricken.

Some have even extended its interpretation to include justification for unparalleled funding for ornate church buildings and further – attempt to squelch any movement that promotes systemic change within the church.

A closer look at the text coupled with a firm understanding of who Jesus is and what His mission embodies will reveal a far different point of view.

Jesus was a champion of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed of ancient Palestine. He was in direct opposition to the ruling order with their oppressive political and social systems. His mission was to bring the good news to the poor and impoverished.

He responded to the world around Him. His miracles dealt almost exclusively with hunger and illness. To focus on Jesus is to focus on the poor. If you claim to be a Christian, and actively work toward the kind of world Jesus envisioned for us – you will always side with the vulnerable and oppose the systems that promise peace and prosperity, but do so through a polarized distribution of wealth.

.....

The thing about interpreting ancient Greek is there are sometimes two ways you can take something. You can either take the present indicative form of a word, or the present imperative form.

They both look exactly the same. The indicative form simply indicates something – for instance the phrase, “you always have the poor with you.” The imperative form commands you. That same phrase turns into, “Keep the poor among you always.”

It’s entirely possible that this phrase which has been used to justify a disregard for the poor was actually a direct command from our Savior to keep the poor at the top of our list – always.

When you break it down by the numbers, it would certainly appear as though that is precisely what the Master was doing. In today’s world the top one percent of the population owns forty three percent of the wealth. The top five percent own seventy two percent of the wealth.

Conversely, the bottom eighty percent of us are left with about seven percent of the wealth. No matter how you slice it up – we really do have to keep the poor among us always.

In looking at scripture critically, which is a very important aspect to our reformed tradition, you can sometimes discover little nuggets like this that allow you to pose the question, are we reading this wrong?

It's up to each era to decide for itself. And that is how we grow in faith - new perspectives arising out of old familiar phrases. It's a beautiful thing, and it reinforces the charge that Christians must never be complacent.

.....

We have so much in this country, an abundance of so many things. It's almost obscene, and yet – there is also a formidable lacking. Hundreds of thousands of children don't have enough to eat. The ranks of the homeless and impoverished now swell with families and young adults, veterans and otherwise employable people who have been marginalized and simply factored out of society.

Our mission must be to keep the poor among us. That singular goal was not lost on either Jesus or His disciples. The followers of Jesus forsook everything and walked with Him. They had absolutely nothing they could call their own, and yet – they kept a common purse, and distributed what little money they had to the poor wherever and whenever they could.

These were people of humble origins, and they still found a way to keep the poor among them. How much more are our capabilities to show compassion and spread the wealth?

There are, of course, opportunities galore to keep the poor among us, but the hard reality is that there are also those who would take advantage of our generosity. The simple response to that argument against providing for all who express a need is – there is enough to go around even if some of what we give goes to those who, like Judas, are thieves. That they exist is not a valid reason to refrain from keeping the poor among us.

Jesus did not hesitate to place the poor and the marginalized and the oppressed at the head of the line – ever. His grace abounded, particularly for the people of His time. It's no accident that they, and we, are among His most cherished.

.....

This fifth Sunday in Lent is a good spot for us to revisit some of the truths we've celebrated over the last few weeks. When the Lenten Season began, we were in the middle of a surprisingly cold winter.

You folks that chose to tough it out in sunny southern climes didn't fare much better, because I know you were keeping track of our weather and sympathizing. You couldn't help yourself. That, too, is a form of keeping the poor among us.

We began with an attitude of gratitude – wove our way through an examination of Jesus as Prophet – accepted the fact that God’s ways are not our ways – and circled back to a view of the Prodigal Son through the remarkable grace on display by his father.

All in all, we’ve come a long way together. And now – we’re looking forward to seventy-degree days, and celebrating once again the fact that we are an Easter people. The risen Lord is for us, the beginning of an abundant life that spins on into eternity.

The next couple of weeks will be a little hectic and entirely joyous. There will of course be moments for sober reflection, and certainly the pangs of compassion as we embrace the full meaning of a life of love embodied in a God who has in mind not simply restoration, but resurrection.

Victory over death. Death no longer holds power over us. We need not fear it. It has become the final triumph of our Lord. We have been restored as the chosen of God. It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves.

So let us continue to devote our energy towards moving in the direction of grace and outward service in the form of keeping the poor among us. It is what Christ commands. His will be done. Amen.