

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



All Souls Chapel Window (South side)

Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

Reading: Ecclesiastes 4:1-7, 13-16

Again, I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Fools fold their hands and consume their own flesh.

Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind.

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. 'For whom am I toiling', they ask, 'and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is vanity and an unhappy business...

Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice. One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom. I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that youth who replaced the king; there was no end to all those people whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Commentary

At the top of the 'Michael' window are the 'scales of judgment', with a child at prayer in one of the pans and a devil in the other pulling at a rope to try and sway the balance. The weighing of souls was the means of assessing a person's life immediately after death in order to judge their fate. The Archangel Michael is most commonly shown weighing the souls of people on Judgment day with demons trying to interfere with the true balance and hence the person's reward of Heaven.

St Paul wrote, 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.' (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The most influential text on the concept of Judgment, and the way we live our lives on earth, is Jesus's Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The sheep represent everybody who has helped those in need and the goats those who have acted in unkind and selfish ways.

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.' (Matthew 25:31-46)

The quote in this window comes from the Book of Ecclesiastes. The author or narrator of the Book is generally called the 'Preacher.' In chapter 4 he talks to us about the awful reality of oppression with remarkable empathy and insight. He ends by commending wisdom as

better than anything – age, power, money and so on. ‘Better a wise child than a foolish king.’ The poor, wise child will dethrone the old, hard-hearted, foolish king and reign instead with wisdom. However, warns the Preacher, it will be easy for people to forget even this wonderful kingship.

It has already been noted that this window, designed between 1915-17 by Martin Travers, is redolent with images of the First World War. The foolish king in the scales is depicted in fact as Kaiser Wilhelm, with up-turned moustache and a crown similar to that of Imperial Germany. This oppressive monarch, and all oppression, needs to be de-seated from their powerful influence in the world by prayer, generous acts of loving kindness and the wisdom that comes from God.

Meditation

From the early church fathers: *Gathering and Separating*, by an anonymous early author from the Greek church

"And he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." So then, people on earth are intermingled, and not only intermingled in that the righteous live side by side with the wicked, but they are also indistinguishable. Between the righteous and the wicked there is no apparent difference. Even as in wintertime you cannot tell the healthy trees apart from the withered trees but in beautiful springtime you can tell the difference, so too each person according to his faith and his works will be exposed. The wicked will not

have any leaves or show any fruit, but the righteous will be clothed with the leaves of eternal life and adorned with the fruit of glory. In this way they will be separated by the heavenly shepherd and Lord. The earthly shepherd separates animals by their type of body, whereas Christ separates people by their type of soul. The sheep signify righteous people by reason of their gentleness, because they harm no one, and by reason of their patience, because when they are harmed by others, they bear it without resistance. He refers to sinners as goats, however, because these vices characterize goats - capriciousness toward other animals, pride and belligerence."

Ponder: On the day of judgment Jesus will ask "to whom did you show love and compassion"?

Prayer

Holy One,

Forgive me for the times when I have missed
an opportunity to show your compassion in the world;
open my heart to my neighbours
and to all your creation,
not in fear of your judgement
but out of love for you.

Through Jesus our Lord. Amen