

The Eye of the Beholder(?)

We speak of art being in the eye of the beholder. We speak of beauty being in the eye of the beholder. What one person finds beautiful and artistic, another person might see as ugly or plain or not artistic at all. Some of the stuff that passes for art nowadays is nothing more than a pile of scrap metal or a spill/sneeze of paint on some canvas. It's not art. It's just something that needs cleaning up. ***But... that's how I see it. That's how my eye beholds it.*** Others would disagree. It's all in the eye of the beholder, right?

As we turn our attention to the Gospel lesson appointed for this morning, we hear Jesus speaking of Judgment Day; more specifically, the times and circumstances that immediately precede that great and wonderful day when Christ returns in all His glory. And even here, if you listen to what I just said, there is a definite eye (or ear) of the beholder reality. For me (and for all true Christians) the return of Christ in glory on Judgment Day will be a ***great and glorious*** day. It's nothing we fear. "*Come Lord Jesus!*" For those outside the faith, though, it will be a day of absolute dread and horror. It's all in the eye of the beholder.

Regarding this difference in perspective, Jesus speaks at length about great ***distresses and terrors and perplexities*** in those last days. Nature will be doing things it has **NEVER** done before, and many people will be absolutely terrified, dropping over and fainting with fear and foreboding. The very powers of the heavens will be shaken. But then Jesus says to His disciples (which includes us): "*When these things begin to take place, you straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" Think about this. While everyone else is ducking and covering, tucking tail and running for cover in godless terror and fear, Jesus tells us to stand tall and raise our heads to heaven; a raise of the head made in the confidence of faith and awe and praise. "*Hosanna! Here comes Jesus!*"

He then immediately launches into a short and simple parable about a fig tree. "*When you see the buds appearing, and then the leaves growing, you know that the summer is near. You know that the time for harvesting ripe figs is drawing near. Well...so it is with the reign and rule of God. When you see these things starting to take place; when you begin to witness the labor pains of Judgment Day, you know (or you should know) that the end is coming; that I am coming. Don't be afraid. Look up and look to Me and rejoice. You belong to Me.*"

As simple and no-nonsense as this little parable is, it really got me thinking. What strikes me here is the fact that ***our Lord (again) ties faith and seeing together.*** We know that faith comes through hearing, and that faith is not based on

what is seen, but rather in what is **not** seen, otherwise it couldn't properly be called faith; it would be called "proof." We get this. And yet...Jesus very clearly speaks of "faithfully seeing." Now, we need to make clear that we don't believe **because** we see. That's not at all what Jesus is teaching, nor has Scripture ever taught this. Rather, our hearing enables us to see. We see clearly and rightly **because** we hear rightly. Our hearing the Word of God opens our eyes to see aright; to see things the way they really are; **to see things from God's perspective.** Our hearing of God's Word helps us to make sense of and rightly interpret/understand what we see. Because of what we've heard from our Lord, we can see all the terrible and terrifying things that we see in this fallen and sinful world, and we know that we can look up and look to Him and see comfort and peace that surpasses all understanding, even as our world may be growing darker and darker and crumbling and dying all around us.

We get this. But...this got me thinking about a ***different perspective.*** **What about the things you don't see?** Remember: Jesus also warned His disciples to "*watch yourselves so that you don't get weighed down/blinded by dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of this world, and then that day will come upon you like a trap.*" It's so easy to look down our noses at all those people who will be rightly terrified in those last days because they don't look to Jesus; because they don't know or trust in Jesus. ***But your Lord also makes clear here that we need to be concerned about ourselves too; about what we're not seeing or focusing on.***

This is what He's getting at with this "trinity" of self-centered deadliness: ***dissipation, drunkenness and cares of this world.*** The drunkenness and cares of this world are pretty self-evident. We get what Jesus means here. "Dissipation," on the other hand, is not a word that comes up often in conversation. Simply put, to be dissipated—*kraipalai* (Greek)—is to be ***crippled/hung over*** because you've been intoxicated or consumed with material, worldly, non-redemptive things. You're sick on all the wrong things; sick to the point of being crippled; sick like a bad hangover with a terrible headache. You don't want to even open your eyes or hear a thing. It hurts too bad.

Look around you. I know Walmart has had you seeing Christmas since before Halloween. Look around this sanctuary and you see "Christmas." Look in your purses or on your phones. You'll see Christmas lists. You see bank accounts and budgets. If you were to look at your life right now, you would see ***great concern*** over shopping and sales ads and higher gas prices and travel deals and schedules for Christmas parties and family get-togethers. You see all kinds of things—things that you care very deeply about; things that easily consume you and dull the faithful senses. In fact, we can get so consumed with all this stuff that we can very easily wind up suffering from hangover before the party even starts.

Think, also, about the things you don't see. Think about how we often fail to see that **missing church is a big deal**. What has your Lord said about remembering the Sabbath and despising His Word and Sacraments? We know the Truth; we know what we've heard, *but we don't always see it that way, do we?* It always seems to be different when we (or our loved ones) are the guilty party. Think about how we don't see why it's a big deal if loved ones get crackers and juice instead of Christ's Body and Blood, or how we don't see the lack of Holy Baptism of a beloved child as something to get all worked up over. Think about how our *feelings and emotions* trump the Truth. Lame self-help psychology with the name "Jesus" cheaply sprinkled in is preferable to the Word rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered...*so long as the self-aggrandizing, self-help version gives us the buzz we desire*. Talk about dissipation and drunkenness!

Look at everyday reality. We rarely look at Scripture, but we know as soon as we have an update on Facebook. We'll fight strangers in Walmart for a popular toy or a TV on sale. We'll stay up until 3am fighting a stranger on Twitter with all the "courage" it takes to type on a keyboard, never daring to say such things face-to-face, but we won't dare speak the Gospel Truth, *not even to our own family members*. Think about that. We'll wage war and divide our own family over such things as opening presents in the morning or at night; over ham instead of turkey; over Christmas Eve or Christmas Day with the in-laws, *but counterfeit sacraments and preaching that's focused on what you need to do rather than what Christ has done...that's nothing to make waves about*. "I don't see what the problem is." You're right. **You don't see**. Your faithful senses have been dulled by self-centered dissipation, drunkenness, and cares/concerns for all the wrong things.

Like I said last week, this is why we take this little bit of time before Christmas to focus on *repentance*. We're all guilty of such spiritually blind inebriation and avoidance. But here's the thing: *Harping on it doesn't change it*. What changes such sinful behavior; what opens the eyes and ears of faith and sobers you up and cleans out the cobwebs and the stupor isn't brow-beating and shaming, but the *Holy Gospel reality of Christ* for you, for me, and for the whole world.

I'll steal the line made famous by John the Baptist: Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! Put down the phone. Put down the remote. Put down the sales ads and the shopping lists. *Put away all malice, all deceit, all hypocrisy, all envy, and all slander*. Lift up your heads. Lift up your eyes. Lift up your ears. Here is your Savior! Look to His manger. Look to His cross. Here [the crucifix] is why Jesus took on flesh and was born of Mary. Here is why Christ came to earth: to die for you and your sins.

Listen to His Word and Promise: "It is finished!" Listen to this great joy and peace that He spoke for you and your salvation from His cruciform altar.

Listen to His resurrection Gospel promise: “*I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*” Look here and see these very simple things (Bread and Wine) through the lens of this blessed Gospel promise. “*This is My body. This My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin. As often as you do this, remember what I have said.*” What you hear and hold fast to in faith enables you to see and behold in ***present-tense joy and peace.*** Here is Christ, holding out to you the gift that is Himself, not because you deserve it; not because you’ve made the “nice” list and stayed off the “naughty” list, ***but because you need it; because He loves you...in spite of you.*** I know others will have a different perspective on all this. Folks: This isn’t an “eye of the beholder” kind of thing. **This is the Truth.** Either you believe it or you don’t. You’re either right or wrong. It’s that simple.

And when you hold fast to this ***blessed Christ-centered, Law-Gospel Truth,*** you **will** have a joy and a comfort and a peace that the world neither knows nor can provide. This, too, is Truth. No matter what befalls you, in faith you will have the comfort and peace of Christ; a comfort and peace that is known ***right now,*** even in the midst of our trials and tribulations; a comfort and peace that all the faithful will know and hold fast to, even when the world completely comes apart at the seams in the dark and chaotic days immediately preceding Christ’s return in Judgment.

Lift up your heads. Lift up your eyes. Behold! The Christ, the almighty Son of God, is in your midst and is with you always, even to the very end of the ages. By virtue of your baptism into Him; into His death and resurrection, ***you belong to Him, and nothing and no one can ever steal this away from you.*** Not even the gates of hell can prevail against this blessed Truth and comfort. May this beautiful Gospel Truth be what you look to and behold and hold fast to, now and into all eternity.

In Christ’s most holy name...**AMEN.**