

UNVEILING THE OTHER, REVEALING CHRIST

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Grace Church in New York
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"As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." (Luke 21:6)

It's hard not hear those words without thinking of this week's presidential election. Actually, it's been a bit hard this week not to think of the election no matter what words we hear. However you voted, the result was probably quite a surprise.

Our city especially seemed in shock. And of course it would be. 76 percent of city voters choose the candidate who didn't win. Here in Manhattan, less than 10 percent voted for the winning candidate. In the precincts around Grace Church, it was around 7 percent or less.

The impossible had happened.

"All will be thrown down."

Whether you supported President-elect Trump or Secretary Clinton, those words just might resonate with you. The Clinton campaign warned voters that a Trump presidency invited disaster. As the former top diplomat told a reporter back in September, "I'm the last thing standing between you and the apocalypse." Perhaps she meant it in humor, perhaps not.

The word apocalypse comes from the Greek for "through the concealed," "uncovering," "revelation." That's why the New Testament book of Revelation is more formally known as the Apocalypse of John or the Revelation to John. St. John experienced a mystic vision, an uncovering of the veil between the realm of the divine and the mundane world. St. Luke, who did not know Jesus personally, had the truth of Christ revealed to him by the apostles and others who knew Jesus firsthand, as evidenced by today's lesson, versions of which are also found in the other two synoptic gospels of Mark and Matthew. It's called the Olivet Discourse, because Jesus delivers it from the Mount of Olives, site of the messianic victory in Old Testament prophecy. The discourse is also sometimes referred to as "the Little Apocalypse," the big one being the Revelation to John.

So what is going on here in this doomsday reading about temple destruction, wars, natural disasters, persecution, and dreadful portents?

Scholars largely believe that the gospel of Luke was written after two momentous events in the Mediterranean world: The first was The Great Fire of Rome in the year 64, which the Emperor Nero blamed on Christians, resulting in their persecution. The second was the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in retaliation for the Jewish rebellion that had retaken control of the city. As Jews dispersed, religious changes were brewing, and Christianity and

rabbinic Judaism divided permanently and bitterly.

Luke includes this story of Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple as a way of reassuring Christians of his time that even though the world they knew was changing, with hardships behind them and ahead of them, God would be with them always. This apocalyptic narrative attempts to shine a light in the darkness.

As today's canticle from Isaiah says,

Surely, it is God who saves me;
I will trust in him and not be afraid

Perhaps this year's political predictions of an apocalypse did come true. No, the world did not end. Power will be peacefully transferred, our leaders called for unity, and the republic continues. But we experienced a revelation in the early hours of Wednesday morning. The veil was lifted on the reality of an even more deeply divided, anxious, and pessimistic nation than we previously realized.

Exit polls revealed that while a great many supporters of Mr. Trump questioned his fitness for office, they were willing to take the chance because his message of change resonated with them and they felt heard by him. Despite warnings of the abyss, they took a leap of faith into the unknown.

"All will be thrown down."

While Clinton voters feared that a Trump administration would threaten the institutions and fabric of our country, those who cast their ballots for the president-elect seemed to have been expressing a deep yearning for the kind of change that they hoped this entirely new kind of Washington outsider would bring to the White House. A great many of them wanted the building blocks of the political system dismantled and thrown down. They agreed with him that the systems are rigged.

There is hurt on both sides in the aftermath. Many Trump voters feel unfairly judged as bigots for holding positions unpopular within a more socially progressive culture. They fear too much has changed in a negative direction. Many who didn't vote for Mr. Trump feel afraid--afraid that their children will be deported; afraid that as Muslim-Americans they are not welcome in this country; afraid that their marriages will be invalidated or their health choices abrogated, afraid of bellicose defense and foreign policy statements made by candidate Trump; afraid of violence from hate groups emboldened by his campaign rhetoric; afraid that bullying and misogyny has been mainstreamed for a younger generation.

With feelings of exclusion and fear on both sides, there is so much healing to be done. We need to bridge our divides and listen to one another. Those of us in New York City might need to step outside what is sometimes a liberal echo-chamber more often with an open heart, and the same is true of those who live in red states and communities and learn about current events primarily through conservative news outlets like Breitbart.

“By your endurance, you will gain your souls.”

Working for healing and unity does not mean overlooking past wrongs, and it does not mean not being on guard against future offenses. In fact, true reconciliation requires an acknowledgment of what has gone wrong. In a pastoral letter to the diocese of New York, our bishops wrote,

“It must not be forgotten that a substantial amount of Mr. Trump's rhetoric...directly contravened the central principles of the Christian ethic...We pray that the heated language of the campaign will not follow him into his presidency or inform his governance, but we also insist: it may not.”¹

Wading into the turbulent waters where faith and politics meet is a risky enterprise, but the bishops set forth principles for guiding our speech and actions as Christians in the public sphere. I want to share them with you here:

- 1) The equality and dignity of all persons...for we are every one of us made in the image of God and his son who said, "I came that all may be one, as the Father and I are one."
- 2) The welcome of the stranger at the gate, remembering that once you were strangers in Egypt...Christians claim solidarity with the oppressed, the vulnerable, the refugee and the outcast who stand at the gate and knock.
- 3) Compassion and relief for the poor, and economic justice for those who are shut out of the human possibility of abundant life...
- 4) A commitment to non-violence, and to peace, and to the sacrifice of self-interest for the sake of that peace...overcome evil with good.

And 5) the gracious stewardship of creation and all that God has given into our hands.

No matter who you voted for or which political tribe you belong to, our bishops have exhorted us to use these principles to hold our elected officials accountable.

“By your endurance, you will gain your souls.”

This week’s unveiling of overlooked realities and deep divisions in our national life provides us with an opportunity to forge new relationships and to deepen existing ones. We must find ways to discuss problems confronting our communities, our nation, and our world in conversations characterized by respect and mutual vulnerability rather than, as is sometimes the case, dismissiveness and self-righteousness. As our bishops write, it is time:

“By God's grace to find together the deeper hopes and dreams which all human beings share, which might bind us more closely to one another, but which have in fact driven us so far apart. This task may be our most urgent work now as a church.”

¹ <https://www.dioceseny.org/we-pray-bishop-dietsche-writes-in-a-letter-to-the-diocese-that-god-grace-mr-trump-with-the-wisdom-and-courage-to-rise-to-the-high-calling-of-his-office-as-we-will-also-pray-that-he-be-imbu/>

Being a catalyst for cultural introspection and change might sound daunting, but we can start at the micro level and work up. There are some simple things we can do in our daily lives to treat everyone with dignity and respect. For example, sometimes it's easy in New York to go about our business and ignore people or treat social relationships as transactional as we rush from one thing to another, but let's make an extra effort to be treat everyone we meet as a beloved child of God. I thought about this on Wednesday when I was busily shopping for a church program when a young woman of color in a headscarf assisted me at the supermarket. I thought about how she might be feeling that day. When I smiled at her and thanked her, I meant it, and it wasn't just because she helped me. I gave thanks inside for this child of God. As we greet everyone we come across as a person deserving of our respect, we honor God's creation and the presence of God in all.

We can be open in conversations with colleagues, friends, and relatives. Instead of ignoring difficult topics or arguing, let's try to understand where the other person is coming from. Then we can share our thoughts and feelings, including if we are hurt by something the other person has said.

We can also send a message with our wallets. We can donate to groups working for justice, peace, and reconciliation, and we can focus our personal spending. This week my husband and I committed to shopping more at the many immigrant-owned and operated businesses in our neighborhood in Queens. Not that it's much of a sacrifice to stop in at one of the local Bengali cafes, Asian supermarkets, or Latin-American panaderias.

We may also be challenged in ways that are less pleasant. Jesus says in Luke's Little Apocalypse that when his followers face difficult days, they will be given an opportunity to testify. Now, I'm not at all suggesting that we will face persecution here in the United States. But injustices happen all the time in this and every land. What will be our response? What will be our testimony? If we build relationships with the Other, both those who think differently than us and those who are targeted for unfair treatment by fellow citizens or leaders, we will be challenged to stand up and say something.

We have already been so challenged this week. I have heard about dozens of incidents of intimidation of women, people of color, LGBT people, and Muslims [*Note: I learned later Sunday evening that two Episcopal churches, in Maryland and Indiana, had been vandalized with racist, homophobic, and pro-Trump graffiti*]. There are also reports of Trump supporters being intimidate and assaulted. As Christians, we cannot countenance such behavior. Let's go out of our way to make sure we Christians are known first and foremost for our love. So let's be unequivocal in our support for individuals and groups that don't feel safe. If you use social media, post statements or pictures of solidarity. If you see intimidation first-hand, say something or seek help. Thanksgiving is coming soon. If your friends or relatives make derogatory comments around the table, don't be silent in an effort to keep the peace. Speak the truth in love. Real relationship requires honesty and accountability.

Despite the challenges we face as a country, the sun will rise in the morning, as President Obama said on Tuesday before the votes were counted. As we return to the habits of our everyday lives,

so too will the church continue its sacred routine. In January, will pray for the new president by name each week, just as we have prayed for all our presidents. And the church will continue to pray for all who work for justice, freedom, and peace, and the victims of hunger, fear, injustice, and oppression.

We will continue to trust in God's grace and goodness. We will continue to preach Christ's mercy and love. And we will continue to put our prayer into action, serving the world in Christ's name: feeding the hungry, the homeless, and the working poor through our ministry to local shelters and food pantries; by building, with our very own hands, more affordable housing through our partnership with Habitat for Humanity; and through welcoming all who walk into this sacred space seeking prayer, rest, and a glimpse of the New Jerusalem foretold by prophet Isaiah.

While we dream of those new heavens and a new earth in which the wolf and the lamb shall feed together on the holy mountain, we will continue to follow Jesus in building the kingdom of God on this earth. It is not a kingdom ruled through human politics. It is a community of disciples and seekers inspired by Jesus' unveiling of the human face of God: a face of love, compassion, and grace. May we be that face to the world, today and always.