

“A Day of Discovery”

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:31-32).

If you glance through history at the paintings of the Last Judgment, you’ll discover a common theme as the heavens are torn open, Christ descends on a throne and the earth breaks apart while the dead rise from their graves. The images in these paintings are overwhelming, with many human bodies mixed together with angels and demons, but one factor in these masterpieces is fairly consistent. If you look closely at the face of just one human being, you will see on that face a look of discovery. The people in these Judgment Day paintings appear as if they’re waking from sleep and only beginning to discover the true meaning of the world, of their Lord, and the mystery of the life that once surrounded them.

Today, these are the very same things we find in our text and, as we examine this reading from Matthew’s Gospel, we experience for ourselves some of that same sense of discovery because in this parable of the Last Day, Jesus uncovers the mysteries of life and one of the things uncovered in this reading is the mystery of the world God created. In this parable, Jesus speaks to His disciples about the end and yet, His words actually talk about a beginning. Notice how Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven. He says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). On the flipside, as Jesus speaks to the wicked, he does not say, “Inherit the punishment prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Instead, he says, “Depart . . . into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

There is an important truth in these words. God never prepared hell for His human creatures. Instead, from the very beginning, God’s intentions were always that humanity would live in eternal and perfect fellowship with Him. No one was ever made for hell. All were created to live with God and to rejoice with Him in His creation. Those who go to hell go there by their own choosing, for they have rejected Jesus and God’s original design for all people in Him.

So, this parable is not merely about the end of the world. Instead, Jesus offers us a discovery *of the world* . . . of the world as God intended it to be! God’s original desire was for humanity to live in relationship with Him, and the day when Christ returns will be the day when God’s plans for creation finally and fully come true.

People often misunderstand Christianity. They think that it’s all about escaping this world in order to live in heaven. For them, Christians stand at a distance from this world, wanting to escape its physical existence so that they can go on, as disembodied souls, to a spiritual life in heaven. Yet that is not what we believe or what we confess. Every time we confess the faith in the Creeds of the Church, we speak of the resurrected body, and we declare our confidence in “the life of the world to come.”

The mission of Jesus Christ was to bring all people into God’s eternal kingdom and, even though we had turned away from God, rejecting His design and falling into sin, God the Father turned toward us, still holding on to His original design. Out of love, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to bear our sin and to be our Savior. And when we are baptized into his death and resurrection, our eternal life with God begins. In Him, there will be a new creation, and we will be raised to live in the world as God originally designed it to be. So we trust in, we live in, and we long for God’s new creation in Him. That’s one of things God reveals in this text.

The second great discovery of this text is the discovery of the mystery of who Christ is. As Jesus speaks to His disciples about the end, notice that the fullness of God is revealed in Jesus. He appears first as the Son of Man, the figure prophesied in the book of Daniel (Daniel 7:13–14), who now has finished God’s work and is seated on His throne (Matthew 25:31). Then, in the language of our Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel, He appears as a shepherd, with the nations as His flock, now separating the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32). Then in verse 34, the shepherd becomes a King, who is also the Son of God, whose rule extends over all nations and throughout all time (Matthew 25:34). This King, however, is hidden – hidden in the needy and suffering of this world (Matthew 25:35–36) – just as Jesus would soon be hidden in the events of his Passion (Matthew 26–27).

As you read this text, it's easy to feel like this parable places Jesus at a distance, descending from heaven at the end of time, but it actually reveals that He is very close to us today! He is the Lord of all nations. God the Father has chosen Him to rule over all things and to fulfill His desire to save all people. In fact, it's for this reason Christ came, that in His life, death and resurrection, God's forgiving, saving rule in this life would be revealed! Yet even though He has ascended into heaven, Jesus continues to speak among us now through his Word, claiming all believers as His family and shepherding them like a flock, until that day when He returns to divide those who trust in him for righteousness from those who do not and to give to the faithful the long-standing desire of God, namely, the gift of eternal life. Jesus has not left us on our own in this world, instead He comes to us in His Word and in His Sacraments and He continues to rule in our midst, proclaiming to us the forgiveness of sins and this gift of eternal life in Him.

This parable concludes the last of the five discourses of Jesus in Matthew, and if you listen closely, you'll hear how it actually takes us back to the very first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount starting in Matthew 5. There, in the Beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5:3–12), we see the people God has called His own. The rejected, the persecuted, the mourning, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; these are God's people and these brothers and sisters receive His eternal blessing.

At the beginning of His ministry Jesus described the "blessed" of God and now, in the final days of His earthly life, Jesus again reveals a people, "blessed by the Father." These people, already made righteous in God's sight by faith in Jesus, are found yet again among those suffering in this world. Only this time, they are sharing God's mercy with those who hunger and thirst; with those who are naked and need clothes; with those who are sick and imprisoned; with those who are strangers in this world. This is the third discovery of the parable. And when, on the Last Day, Jesus reveals these things as good works, their acts of faith come as a shock! "When did we see You hungry or thirsty? When did we invite you in or clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit You?" And here, in an even more amazing revelation, Jesus unveils His hidden presence among those "brothers," who were hungering, thirsting, naked, sick, imprisoned, and strangers in this world.

When you look at the classical paintings of the last judgment, the faces of the people are filled with wonder and awe. The artists understood and captured their discovery of the majesty of Christ when He returns to rule. Yet today, Christ paints an even more astounding picture. You see, for us, who have been made righteous by faith in Christ, there will be an even more amazing discovery on that day. God will reveal the good that you have done in ways that escape your understanding.

Like the "righteous" in this parable, God's people never know the scope of their good works in this life. On that Last Day, however, our Lord will reveal to the faithful their good works of mercy in this world and He will also reveal that He was present in those hidden moments of ministry, graciously receiving from our hands the mercy we didn't even know we were giving.



In 1304, the great Renaissance painter Giotto began working on a series of frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy. At the very back of the chapel is the largest scene; a picture of the last judgment. It's a fresco, which means that the artist and his assistants painted this masterpiece on wet plaster. By necessity, the painting was done quickly, but the image they produced is a glimpse of the eternal. The scene of Christ's return covers the entire wall, with those raised to eternal life on His right and those raised to eternal punishment on His left. At the bottom of the image, underneath the cross, is the doorway through which the congregation would return to the world after worship. Think about it, the last image they saw as they entered the world was Christ returning in glory.

Today, Christ gives us a glimpse of His return and it should completely redefine our life in this world. Today, as you walk through the doors of this church and into the world, you do so under a vision of Christ's love and with the mystery of heaven written in your heart. In

Jesus Christ, God has opened our eyes to eternity. In Jesus Christ, God has forgiven us of all our sin and declared us to be "blessed." He has promised us a place on His right and the discovery of this mystery will enable us to understand our world, to rejoice in the hidden blessings of God and to reach out in love to the least of our brothers and sisters because Christ is with us. Amen.

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