

Trinity 10, 2019

Tombs of Deceit

Matthew 23:34-49

St. Andrew's Church, Jacksonville, OR

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*"Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city."*

Right out of the gate this morning our Gospel hits us with some tough words. It is evident from how our reading begins that more has already been said and so, to put things in context, we need to back up and visit some of the discussion Jesus was leading. We need to find out what the 'wherefore' is therefore. When we do this we find Jesus speaking to His disciples and to the multitude that are willing to listen. I also imagine that sitting in the background under the protection of the shadows the scribes and Pharisees are too listening intently. The mere verbiage itself seems to indicate that Jesus is not holding back and is about to set things straight.

Over and over again Jesus calls out the scribes and Pharisees for being hypocrites. They speak one way to the people and act in the opposite. The examples they are setting are irreverent and contrary to the message Jesus brought. Jesus sees their hearts and their actions and the Word made flesh opens the eyes of all to see the truth. His words in verses 13 through 16 must be hard to endure for those present in their guilt:

*"Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees; ye shut up the kingdom of heaven...ye devour widows houses...ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves...ye are blind guides..."*

And then in verse 29 we see the condemnation that brings us closer to our reading today. *"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of*

*the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets."*

To outward eyes the building of the tombs and the decorations put thereon would seem to be worthy actions intent in their honoring of such great men of God who were willing to give their very lives for the truth of the Gospel. But things are not as they seem. Jesus is not condemning their actions because they are blaming their ancestors for martyring the prophets nor is He condemning them for building the tombs and decorating the sepulchers. Jesus in pronouncing woe upon them for the deceit that lays hidden in their hearts. You see, their actions do not match their intent.

*"Their purpose, says St. Chrysostom, was not to honor those that were slain but to make a show of their murders. They are afraid lest, when the tombs had perished by time, the proof of their daring should fade away. They set up these buildings as a kind of trophy, priding themselves in the daring deeds of those men and displaying them."*

They are passing off statues representing the success of murdering the prophets as memorials in order to get support from the misinformed. Worldly lives lived out under the context of spiritual witness...deceit covered in the guise of compassion. Are we any different today? There are great men of God today preaching the truth, but they are being stifled by a mass media bent on changing the message, great men pointing to a mass departure from the Christian faith in the face of ever changing ideologies within the church itself. People are shying away from the Gospel or altering its meaning without questioning why. Churches are being built and decorated putting on a facade that attracts the masses with a false compassion while liturgies and scripture are veering more and more into a secularism that only hints at Christianity. And the pot boils on...

And so we are back to our reading for this morning. *"Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city."*

The death may be the slow death of denial...denial of the Gospel message. Even in the church we see this. Compassion is not real compassion if it is expressed in an emotional response that has its roots in the anti-Christian movement. Some of these movements seem to be loving in their nature, but we are talking about salvation...lives lived in accordance with the living words of God found in Jesus Christ! As Christians we need not be afraid to uphold biblical truths or to speak boldly for the Gospel truth of the kingdom. We should be more afraid to keep our mouths closed against the direction of false leaders be they in politics, the church or the media.

Today the death of the prophets is not limited to a physical death. The Gospel message and those who profess it are being deterred from speaking the truth through the use of a single prefix, "anti"; anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-tolerant. And not from just those of a worldly disposition but from many within the Christian ranks. Afraid of being martyred or condemned for holding to traditional and conservative values some have joined with the ever flowing ebb of social pressure. It is no longer the prophets who are being martyred, but the whole of Christianity.

As the Pharisees of old misrepresented the tombs of the prophets, so too are the forces that be misrepresenting Christianity. In the name of tolerance everyone has the right to be offended and there is always someone waiting in the wings to push the next step into the limelight of compassion. Those who hold fast to the gospel cry out against the absurdities of our day only to be shut down as rigid "use-to-bee's" who have no place on the moral platform. Today pedophiles are banding together and piggy-backing on the gay movement arguing that they are born with their disposition and need understanding instead of judgment. And the abortion crusade...well, let me refer to Fr. Gene Geromel, rector of St Bartholomes's in Swartz Creek, Michigan, diocese of the Holy Cross:

*There are, he states, "spectacles such as priests and rabbis getting together to bless Planned Parenthood while state governors and friends applaud bills allowing infanticide...Pretty soon, if this apparently compassionate but evil way of thinking isn't rectified, we will see clergy blessing termination of two-year-olds. In case you didn't know (he*

continues) *two has already been proposed as the age below which we should be able to mercifully put the little ones to sleep*" (*Forward in Christ vol. 12 no. 1, April 2019*).

Shocking! I looked into it and sure enough this perverse line of thinking began on a college campus in Tennessee in January 2018.

Are we making the victims of these insanities secondary to their perpetrators? Are the upcoming new laws of today only a twisted version of the tombs built by the Pharisees of old?

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Let it be known by every Christian that our Lord not only expects us to speak truth but also requires us to live in truth! We may be criticized, rebuked and scorned, some may even loose everything including life itself, but you are eternal beings with the Father already and have no need to hide behind the lies this current world blindly justifies.

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!*

"And ye would not." But we have! Under the wings of Jesus we are secure, under the wings of Jesus we have hope, under the wings of Jesus we have life everlasting and a joy that builds us up as we fight against the darkness of this present age. Don't let false tombs and promising decorations draw you into the luring side streets, but make your statement loud and clear: "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!