

What the World (Without End) Has to Do with Worship
Psalms 19; Matthew 21:33—46

What in the world does the ‘WORLD’ have to do with worship? And if that’s not your question, maybe you’re wondering what influence or impact your worshipping today, in this space, might have on the world. Maybe, you’re wondering that. I can’t be sure. And the reason I can’t be sure is that *wondering* is one of those things that can’t be precisely measured. There’s nothing for certain, for example, when a small child is sitting in the backseat of a car, gazing out the window at the world passing by, and we happen to be driving alongside, and instead of gazing down at Google Maps or Apple Maps, getting from point A to point B, our eyes meet that wondrous gaze. And, you see, for a fleeting moment, the world isn’t just where the Global Positioning System is telling us where we’ve come from and where we’re going. For a flicker of an instant, the world isn’t what the Internet or the Artificial Intelligence is telling us it is. I don’t know. You don’t know. That child, looking at us through a passing car, doesn’t know. Did somebody say something?

*Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.*

Psalms 19 happens to be one of my favorite psalms; and my sense is that, as Jesus wandered the 50 miles or so from Galilee to Samaria to Jerusalem he probably had every word memorized. And he probably understood all too well: the ‘WORLD’ is *out there*! Isn’t it? Or maybe it’s *in here*... Isn’t it?

Here's one way of thinking about it. In the famous musical, *Fiddler On the Roof*, everybody in the small village of Anatevka, has a part to play; and it's the innkeeper, by the name of Mordcha, who functions as a sort of cynic. And so, when news comes about the various riots and the arrests and the executions happening in the big cities, his only comment is, "*Why should I break my head about the outside world? Let the outside world break its own head!*" And, of course, in some sense, this fictions character is right. In 1994, a real-life person, named Rodney King, got caught in the race riots happening at the intersection of Foothill Boulevard and Osborne Street in the Lake View Terrace neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. (You can look it up on Google if you want to.) And not only did world break its own head that day; Rodney King did too. "Can't we all just get along?" he said later during an interview with a reporter; and as if to poke holes in the naïveté of that question, the reporter noted, "We understand that Mr. King has suffered from brain damage." And that's the world! Thanks for listening!

And yet:

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
as it was in the beginning
is now and ever shall be
world without end. Amen. Amen.*

You see, within the context of Christian belief in the Holy Trinity—God in Three Persons—the word "*world*" makes an appearance. You and I may like it. We may prefer to keep God in heaven separate from us and all the shady people of the world. But claim of the *Gloria Patri* is there for anyone with ears to hear. The world has been invited into the Divine Fellowship. Did somebody say something?

Yes, as a matter of fact, Jesus once told a parable—the one that we’ve read from Matthew 21:33—40. It’s the story of a vineyard, but not the kind of vineyard we might visit in Walla Walla or in Napa Valley or in the verdant slopes of France. *This* vineyard is violent; and it’s under the care of some pretty violent tenants. And what I’d like to emphasize this morning is that Jesus isn’t comparing this vineyard with the kingdom of heaven. On so many other occasions, he’s apt to make that comparison. He says the kingdom of heaven is like *a mustard seed*, or *a net full of fish*, or *a woman finding a lost coin*, or *a treasure hidden in a field*. Jesus is in the habit of comparing people, places and things with the kingdom of heaven. But this parable about this vineyard is different. And, to me, its description provides us with ample evidence of Jesus’ exposure to all the trauma and trouble in the world. It is the world, according to John 3:16 that **God so loves...**; but it is also the world, according to First John 2:15, that we’re told **not to love**. So which is it? It’s the world where people conspire and collude in order to make a profit, or as they say, ‘a killing.’ And yet, it may also be the world where the SURPLUS of God’s Love survives and becomes available and abundant in all that’s so flippantly rejected.

I was talking earlier about the maps we use to navigate the world and to manage the territories of our daily lives; but do you know what’s rejected when we remain too glued to our maps or to fixated on the territories of the world that God loves versus the world we’re told to hate? What’s rejected is the actual experience of being in the midst of that tension. If I have a map of Glacier National Park (like I have a Bible in my hand) and I never look up to see a melting glacier or a bear that’s caring for her cubs or a soaring eagle or the wrinkled face of another hiker on the trail, I’m missing the SURPLUS.

“When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.”

Now, I don't know how you hear that last word in verse 34, but it doesn't seem right to me. In the Greek, it's also been translated as “fruit”—and I get that. But what about SURPLUS? I wonder. Does it really make sense for the vineyard owner, while residing in ***“another country,”*** to ask for the tenants to provide him with the grapes they've picked or with the jugs of wine they've fermented? I think what Jesus is alluding to here is the SURPLUS—whatever's left after everything's been bought and paid for—after all the expenses have been taken care of. The vineyard owner in the parable wants to collect the SURPLUS. And even when he finally sends his son, and the tenants throw him out and kill him...hmmm... the SURPLUS IS STILL THERE. Is it there in the world that still suffers, where people, places and things are still overlooked and rejected? Is it there after two thousand years of going from the Roman Empire to whatever 'empire' this is? Pay attention to how parable concludes in verse 40: Jesus asks the chief priests and the elders what they think is going to happen to the violent tenants when the owner of the vineyard comes in person; and their answer is more violence:

“He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his SURPASS at harvest time.”

You see, Jesus doesn't say this. They do. And then comes verse 42: ***“Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures:***

***‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes’?***

And verse 43: ***“Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the SURPLUS of the kingdom.”***

In other words, if we're at all curious about the SURPLUS, look for it and listen for it in the world—which involves us with the very people, places and things that are often REJECTED. Don't abandon the world as going to hell in a hand basket. Don't imagine heaven as some kind of escape hatch to get away from it all. And finally, let's not simply buy the world a Coke, think we've done our duty and call it good. Do you know what I mean? Do you get my reference?

Despite what we may have been told for a few generations now, the marketing of *Coca Cola* is not the *Real Thing*. The Real Thing—the most authentic thing in the world—is what's offered and available around this table—and it's not trade-marked and it's not for sale. But unfortunately, with a catchy tune from 1971, many of us got sidetracked.

I'd like to buy the world a home
and furnish it with love
grow apple trees and honey bees
and snow white turtle doves
I'd like to teach the world to sing
in perfect harmony
I'd like to buy the world a coke
and keep it company.
It's the real thing
what the world wants today
It's the real thing!

Wow! Who knew? Throughout all the millennia of the world's existence, who knew that all it really wanted was a sugary, caffeinated beverage—or maybe a drink with zero calories in case *the world* might be struggling with diabetes? But where Jesus comes down on this farcical question is here: **This is my body. This is my blood.**

I will probably never travel to San Salvador, which in English means *Holy Savior*. I will probably never block off the time or book a plane ticket. I will probably never ask the flight attendant for a Coke before arriving at that destination in the world. I'll probably never learn the language. (Maybe you will. Maybe you'll get there.) And yet, there's something that took place in San Salvador, in the nation of El Salvador, which is part of the world, that has made me curious for my entire ministry. It happened in March of 1980, at the *Divine Providence Hospital*. Father Oscar Romero had been celebrating mass and assembling the elements for Holy Communion (just like I will do shortly). Father Romero had just preached his homily to the poor peasants who were being treated at the hospital. He'd been saying that Jesus was a person *like them*, seemingly rejected and not worth very much in eyes of the rich and powerful. And just then, as those words had been spoken, suddenly, the WORLD WITHOUT END happened. It just happened. An assassin entered the sanctuary and shot the priest who was just about to offer the body of Christ, just about to offer the blood of Christ.

Like I said, I'll probably never go to that spot in the world. (South America's not really on my bucket list.) But every time I come to worship here at 6721 North Monroe Street, it's that spot in the world that comes looking for me. And, in Christ, it truly looks for *us*. It's the Real Thing; and I pray that I won't turn away from this world. I pray none of us will:

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
as it was in the beginning
is now and ever shall be
world without end. Amen. Amen.*