

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'A' (Proper 28)
15 October 2023
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

MY OBJECT ALL SUBLIME

This morning I'm reminded of a line in a song in *The Mikado*:

"My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—
To let the punishment fit the crime."

And this in turn makes me think of the film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* in which a surgeon, Steven, and his family are befriended by a young man named Martin whose father died on Steven's operating table. Strange things start happening to Steven's family—including paralysis—which somehow Martin is responsible for and which he will stop if Steven kills one of his children. Horrified, Steven's wife Anna asks Martin why he's doing such terrible things and he chillingly replies that it's the closest thing to justice that he can think of. The film makes us ponder the challenging question: How do you redress a wrong—and is the response an overreaction?

Then there's our gospel reading this morning. It begins in a familiar way: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." All well and good—we assume. Except not only does no one want to come to the banquet, some of the invitees torture and kill the slaves who were handing out the invitations. In response, the king sends in his troops to murder everyone and completely annihilate the city. The parable makes us ponder the challenging question: How do you redress a wrong—and is the response an overreaction?

Though it's uncomfortable to admit, the truth is the Christian tradition has a long history of lifting up a disproportionate response as the divine way of redressing humanity's wrongs. You know how it goes: Humanity was so rotten and sinful that the only way God could redeem us was to send his perfect Son into our midst to have all of our rotten sinfulness placed onto him and die for our sake. But what did we do to warrant something so extreme?

Well, *we* didn't do anything to warrant such an extreme response, unless you accept Augustine's warped idea of original sin—the concept that Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden was transferred to every subsequent generation and individual. In other words, we're sinful through no fault of our own. But we *are* sinners by nature—nature which has traditionally been called "fallen."

It's time to let such ideas fall away. Their time had come even back in Jesus' day, which is why I think he told such outrageous parables. Did you notice the subtle nuance in the one we just heard? "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ..." Other translations say "The kingdom of heaven is like," but this morning we heard a better rendition of the original Greek: *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to*. One commentator even translated this verse as "People often describe the kingdom of heaven as if God were like Herod." Or how about this? "Some say the kingdom is like." Some say the kingdom is like indifferent folk who kill messengers delivering an invitation. Some say the kingdom is like a king who murderously overreacts to his invitation being refused. Some say the kingdom is like a banquet where people are compelled to come in and then are persecuted for not showing up in the approved costume.

Well, some have said the kingdom is like that. And some still *do* say it's like that. But Jesus is saying exactly the opposite in this parable. The kingdom *may* be compared to this kind of regime of terror—but it shouldn't be. The kingdom of heaven *may* be compared to this world of violence and retribution and conformity—but it isn't like that at all. Maybe Jesus wants us to identify with the guest who's thrown out of the banquet for not wearing the proper garment. Maybe we're to understand that guest as a person who refuses to participate in a kingdom of violence and coercion. Maybe we're to not only understand, but to also do likewise.

Now, I realize this all sounds so facile—especially in light of the horror playing out in the Holy Land. How can such acts of terror be redressed and when does the response become an overreaction? I'm not wise enough to propose an answer, though I'm sure we all resonate with the Archbishop of Canterbury who issued a press release urging the Israeli government to "exercise their right of defence with the wisdom that might break the cycles of violence." That being said, neither he nor we are there and it's easy to philosophize and moralize from a safe distance.

But we *are* here and the vicious hatred that's been savagely unleashed in the place where Jesus walked is here, too, even if kept quietly under wraps. The simplistic mantra "It won't happen here" is now just that—simplistic. Because it can happen here and does happen here a thousand little ways when we choose revenge over forgiveness or seek to cast out rather than draw in.

Acknowledgement of that stark truth requires us to grapple with those challengingly persistent questions: How do you redress a wrong—and is the response an overreaction? We know that answering violence with violence solves nothing. And yet, like the sinister boy in the film, so often it's the closest thing to justice we can think of. But behind me there's a cross which ineluctably draws our gaze and makes us reconsider the ways we respond to wrongs and the ways in which kingdom-style justice is rendered. The powers that nailed Jesus to the cross thought this was a punishment to fit the crime. But God had an object even more sublime: to make the perversion of justice the means of salvation. Not because an innocent Jesus suffered

in place of a guilty humanity, but because Jesus' refusal to respond in violence is the only example that can save us from the horror and chaos of this present age.

The kingdom of heaven is like a place where our gentleness is known to everyone. The kingdom of heaven is like a place where "Rejoice in the Lord always" is the only way to live. The kingdom of heaven is like a place where things that are true, and honourable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable thrive. The kingdom of heaven is like a place where wrongs *are* redressed by an overreaction—at least an overreaction by society's violent standards: an overreaction of passive resistance. Of willing sacrifice. Of undying love.

Well—the kingdom of heaven isn't *like* these things at all. It *is* these things. But only if we dare to follow Christ's example and work to help make it come.