

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A23
19 Pentecost (Proper 23A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist
Sunday 11 October 2020 Ellen Clark-King's Farewell

Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

Firm in the Lord: Farewell to a Beloved Friend

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord" (Phil. 4).

1. Above all Christianity is an orientation towards suffering. And today on Ellen's last Sunday with us I want to linger a little over a verse from a hymn she wrote. It goes like this: "God incarnate, our true mother / Birthing us to joy and pain / Showing us the steps to dance to / Loving us to life again / Grow us into your true image / As we strive for your love's reign."¹

This time we have shared together has been full of joy and pain. But through all of this God has been teaching us to dance. We have been traveling the way of Jesus together and behold in the twinkling of an eye we have been changed!

Christianity did not begin on Christmas Day. Even the idea of celebrating the birth of our Savior only took hold after a few centuries. No, this way of faith began in a graveyard, at a moment of unbearable pain when a group of women went to wash the body of someone they intensely loved – Jesus. In that moment of shared sadness they were dazzled by God's presence and joy overtook them.

At the heart of all this is not a belief about what happens when you die, or who God is, or any other belief. At the center is a way of being. You might call it the way of compassion, or being a child of light. Compassion means literally to suffer with. It means not turning your back on the pain all around us. It means being a light to others, keeping vigil, listening both to each other and for the voice of God. Above all in this historical moment of COVID, economic apocalypse, racial despair, gender inequality, violence and threats of disintegration, we are called to really be with each other in the midst of pain.

After the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, our staff began a yearlong anti-racism training course. Last week Jumon who is my age, black, a longterm staff member and a real leader talked with deep emotion in his voice. He said, "I feel like I never had a chance. Everybody knows racism is wrong but nothing is changing. And when I hold my little grandson, I know that he doesn't have a chance either." As he

spoke I felt my heart breaking. He did nothing wrong and yet from the beginning the world has cursed him, his children and even his children's children.

Sharing the light of Jesus means being with others in their pain. It also involves knowing that Jesus is with us when we suffer. During the AIDS epidemic when hundreds were dying every week here in this city, Grace Cathedral made it our mission to ensure that no one would die alone. Above all true faith is an orientation towards suffering, it means allowing your heart to be broken and depending completely on God

2. I want you to keep this in mind as we listen to the story that Jesus tells this morning. Ayred participates in my Wednesday night Bible class. He's absolutely new to faith and he always asks "What is the context and significance of this passage." So let me begin there. There are two contexts that matter in particular for today's story. One for Jesus and another for Matthew who wrote it.

By this point in his life stories like this may be the only thing keeping Jesus alive. He enters Jerusalem in a huge procession as people wave palm branches and throw their cloaks on the road before him. Then he enters the temple and casts out the people doing business there. Uninvited he takes up residence there healing and teaching. The religious authorities want to have him arrested but they fear the crowds.

Did any of you have outlandish dreams at the beginning of COVID? The wild stories Jesus tells are like that, full of impossible events and crazy, unexpected turns. A king invites dignitaries to a wedding feast, but strangely they make excuses about needing to return to their agron and emporian, their fields and businesses. Others even mistreat and kill the people who bring the invitations. So the king mobilizes the army to kill them and burn their city.

But the lavish meal has already been prepared and so the king invites everyone from the crossroads of daily life, the good and bad together. Since they come right from the marketplace I imagine the king's servants issuing wedding garments at the door and one man inexplicably refuses. He has come for the lavish meal not to participate in the spirit of the occasion. So the king confronts him and throws him out into the outer darkness.

The context for Matthew helps us understand this story as a kind of allegory. About forty years after the death of Jesus, the Roman Empire utterly crushes an uprising that takes place in the region. As part of an effort to destroy every shred of culture and pride, the Romans destroy the Temple in Jerusalem (where Jesus told this story).

The allegory is simple. God sends prophets like Jesus, Matthew and many others who are ignored or worse yet, persecuted. The Roman army destroys everything. And then the church arises. It is that new cosmic wedding feast of the good and bad of all creation together, celebrating the Son.

But context is not everything. For me, the genius of the parable is that it gives us a world that has it both ways, where two seemingly contradictory truths both hold. On the one hand we are all included in God's kingdom – the good and the bad together. And yet at the same time Jesus calls us to act, to live in a certain way that is clear and easy to recognize.

Paul calls this putting on Christ. You as well as I know what this looks like. It means living humbly for other people. It involves having a kind of gentleness, so that you can really listen. It means compassion, suffering with our neighbor, caring about the people who have the hardest time in society. This is how we become a light which shows God's love to the world. These are the qualities that Ellen Clark-King has so thoroughly demonstrated during her four years here.

Ellen certainly isn't perfect. So why do we all love her so dearly? Let me give you a few examples. Imagine if every newspaper was perfectly designed and tailored for your interests. Imagine if politicians offered an entirely unique message just for you and a totally different one for a farmer in the Central Valley or a coal miner in Pennsylvania. Imagine if dictionary definitions, Wikipedia articles tried to anticipate what you wanted to hear. Obviously this is the world we have begun to enter. What I am describing is the Artificial Intelligence algorithms on Facebook and YouTube that both determine what you see and try to make you watch for longer.

What bothers us about this kind of world is that it lacks integrity. Integrity is related to the word integer, the number one. It means to be the same with whoever you are talking to. Ellen is polite, she always has in mind who she is speaking to (whether it is a working class housecleaner in Newcastle or a Dean of a Cambridge College), but she always has integrity.

The most powerful moment in our interminable discussions about what kind of Cathedral we wanted to be happened during our discussion of the mission statement. The quietest staff person stood up and said that she wanted us to be just like Ellen. She said that Ellen is meek, kind and connects with anyone, but she is a lion who stands up against injustice and unfairness. Ellen is a pioneer in the movement for women's liberation as one of the first priests ordained by the Church of England. Facing all that opposition has made her very strong indeed.

In her first book Ellen writes, "all human lives have the potential to reveal something of the grace and nature of God and our image of God will remain incomplete unless we attend to such revelations."² Ellen acts like this most of the time.

It would not be an Ellen sermon without some mystics in it. The Desert Fathers and Mothers were radically devoted to the light. Macarius of Egypt (300-391) said that those who are spiritually awake ("Born from on high of the Holy Spirit) "not infrequently weep... for the whole human race... with spiritual love for all humanity. At times also their spirit is kindled with such joy and such love, that if it were possible they would take every human being into their heart without distinguishing the good and the bad... the spirit makes them live afresh in ineffable joy."³

Ellen also has taken us, the good and bad together, into her heart. My point is not just that Ellen is great but that we can be a blessing in exactly the same way. Above all Christianity is an orientation toward suffering.

In my mind's eye Ellen I will always see you marching through the streets of San Francisco and in procession through this Cathedral. I will picture you writing poems, prayers and hymns, speaking wisdom in meetings and sermons... and in everything you do provoking the smug and comforting the suffering. I shall miss you.

Let us pray: God, incarnate, our true Mother, our hearts are breaking but that is as it should be. Help us not to hold suffering at arm's length but to allow our hearts to be broken even at the departure of a true friend. We commend to you our sister Ellen. Wherever she travels may the people she encounters see the listener and the lion who we have come to love. Thank you that through her you have shown us the steps to dance to, that in her you have loved us to life again. Amen.

¹ **Christ Sophia by Ellen Clark-King**

Christ Sophia, Child of Wisdom
Dancing in our deepest dreams
Calling us to love unbounded
Daring us to God's extremes -
peace and gentleness and justice
Kingdom values, wisdom's themes.

Brother Jesus, Child of Mary
Walking with us on life's way
Showing us God's humble kingdom
Sharing both dark night and day

Breaking through death's seeming ending
Into new life's dawning ray.

God incarnate, our true mother,
Birthing us to joy and pain
Showing us the steps to dance to
Loving us to life again
Grow us into your true image
As we strive for your love's reign.

² Ellen Clark-King, *Theology By Heart: Women, the Church and God* (Werrington, Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2004) 15.

³ Pseudo-Macarius: "Those who have been judged worthy to become children of God and to be born from on high of the Holy Spirit. . .not infrequently weep and distress themselves for the whole human race; they pray for the 'whole Adam' with tears, inflamed as they are with spiritual love for all humanity. At times also their spirit is kindled with such joy and such love that, if it were possible, they would take every human being into their heart without distinguishing between good and bad. Sometimes too in humility of spirit they so humble themselves before every human being that they consider themselves to be the last and least important of all. After which the Spirit makes them live afresh in ineffable joy." From, Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*. <https://witnessetohope.org/category/authors/pseudo-macarius/>

Or, Pseudo-Macarius, Homilies.

"At other times, they are in grief and lamentation for all mankind, and interceding for the whole stock of Adam. They take up a wailing and a weeping for it; the love of the Spirit for the human nature kindling and flaming out within them. At other times the joy and love of the Spirit inflames them to that degree, that were it possible, they would snatch up every man into their own bowels, not making the least distinction of the bad from the good. (Homily 10: 7).

http://www.seanmultimedia.com/Pie_Macarius_Egyptian_Homilies_6-11.html