

**Proper 14 year C 2025**

In his opus entitled, *Poetics*, Aristotle wrote that the force of a piece of rhetoric is founded by an unambiguous assertion as to its theme in the prologue. Tell your audience, up front, what your writing is about. If they were to get lost in the narrative action of the piece, they only need to look back at the prologue to clarify what all the action means. So, let's step back a moment in Luke's Gospel. Back to the prologue. Luke begins with the announcement of the birth of a child who will usher in a brave new world. The child's mother, Mary, describes in prophetic reverie what that world looks like: It is a world in which God has empathy for the abused and the shamed; a world in which the corrupt vision of the arrogant is wrecked; a world in which the powerful are deposed... a world in which there is a redistribution of wealth, wherein all share in this planet's abundance. A great reversal of the social and economic hierarchy. Mary's words articulate the great expectations of the vast majority of the human community. Abusive power the intractable problem. Her hope is our hope.... And yet, for over two millennia nothing has changed.

On one level history is a record of the ebb and flow of wealth and power, and the violence and abuse that the pursuit of wealth and power engenders. Every civilization we know of was forged under the deadly hands of violence, not just physical violence, but social and economic violence as well. The philosophical visions of both Adam Smith and Karl Marx, who both imagined a just society on the heels of the Enlightenment and

the emerging modern world.... Their philosophical visions were co-opted and undermined by the powerful who own the levers of control over governments and their respective economies. In our own nation, the checks and balances, the separation of powers against tyranny, are failing us. The Fascist coup being perpetrated by the present administration was ultimately predictable and not all that surprising. Such is the way of the unchecked power of empire. Artificial intelligence, the powerful new technology that will control almost unlimited facets of our daily lives, is in the hands of the wealthy and powerful. Who will benefit from such technology? Even democracy succumbs to the sirens' song of elite power and wealth.

So, all of this begs the existential question: Did the scribes of our sacred Gospels get it wrong? Were they idle dreamers? Were Luke's words, in the voice of Mary, Jesus's mother, mere naïveté. Is the egalitarian vision of Christian apologists over the centuries a hollow wish bedeviled by false hope? In facing such a question, the church, over the centuries, has opted to speak of salvation as something attained in the next life, thereby abandoning the ancient prophecy of the kingdom of God being imminent in the world. But according to scripture, the church's expedient theological spin notwithstanding, salvation is about how we order our common life here and now. Plato's monumental question still looms large: "How then shall we live?" Empires fail; they will not save us. Where is there hope?

So let's go back to the prelude of Luke's Gospel, and see if there is a word for us. I read to you Luke's prophetic words in the voice of Mary; but she doesn't say that the great reversal of fortune *will* happen.... She says that it already has happened. A present reality. God has seen the abused estate of God's servant; God has shown strength and scattered the arrogant; God has put down the mighty from their thrones; God has fed the hungry; God has revealed the emptiness of the rich. Not God will do this; God will do that. These aren't predictions. These are observations as to the empowering reality of God's gracious reign present among us... as it has always been present among us. This is a call to action and awareness to live in the world free from illusion; to live in the world as it truly is; to see through the dark veil of illusion and fear... Keep those God things close, she says; live for the truth. Compassion is our truth; mercy is our Truth; hospitality is our truth; calling for justice is our truth. That is how we live in the kin-dom of heaven... Heaven here and now. Not a naïve and false hope, but an enlightened way of life, which is the very kin-dom of God in its becoming.

In our reading from Luke this morning, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not fear... it is the Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom." Present tense. It's taken me years to come to this awareness, but the kingdom of God is not some future utopia; nor is it a world set right at last; a world set free from the evils of human history in its unfolding. The kingdom of God exists amid the wrack and ruin of our world; a poetic juxtaposition, as it were; a dance between the dark and the light. Perhaps, dare I say, the world's

darkness is an unlikely gift against which Love must strive. A contrast against which we may see the truth more clearly, and with gratitude. God's kin-dom conspires with the darkness, if you will, to make itself known.

The kingdom of God is a process, an improvisational practice, the means by which to live into our true humanity as a witness to the presence of Love in our world. Wealth and power will not save us... but Love does. Love is not for the future; Love is always now. Our loving our neighbor are points of light in a universe of darkness. Love is our destiny, and when in Love, the power of empire loses its grasp of hearts and minds, because Love is stronger. We gather as God's people so that we may remind ourselves of who we are. In our fellowship, our conversations, the breaking of bread and in our prayers, we collectively pay attention to the reality that we are God's people, and that we live within God's gracious Love and favor.... Not a future hope, but a present reality.

What shall we fear, good people? Death? We will all surely die. Do we pine for the presumed well-being of wealth and self-sufficiency? Luke is clear that the obsessive pursuit of wealth is our very undoing, particularly in light of the fact that we are a mortal race. Luke's words are about the meantime: How do we live a full life. In the present moment. How do we fulfill our destiny that is now? I'll say it again, Jesus did not come to be worshipped. Jesus, along with prophets, truth-tellers, throughout history, came to teach us how to live authentically.... He taught us to live lives of compassion and sacrifice for the other. Abundant life, he calls it. To be light in a world besieged by the

dark of our own doing. Brothers and sisters, be awake to the truth of who we are as children of God. Know that to serve is the only thing.... It is God's pleasure that God's reign is manifest, present, in our serving. Know that the truth is found in sacrifice, and that the truth will set us free from the illusions of our world, and from the power those illusions have over us.

Luke is evoking the presence of mystery; and the mystery of now; that things aren't necessarily what they seem. Possibility, the way of God. The images of the wedding host, and the thief throw us into imaginative speculation, an odd reversal as to the way of things. We have to be on our guard as to what passes for reality... and on our guard against the illusions the world foists upon us. We must, in short, pay attention. May God steal away our illusions and our notions of self-sufficiency. The kin-dom of God is not to be understood, but felt by the imagination of the soul. The mystery calls us to stay attuned to the Truth; the truth that lives and moves among us... and the truth will set us free to be light... light that the dark of our world will not, cannot overcome.... With God's pleasure... Just for today.