

Sermon: Look, He is Coming with the Clouds

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, Nov. 21, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I wonder, in this day and age, if we actually see Jesus, coming with the clouds, as seen in the cover of this week's bulletin, would we actually recognize it, acknowledge it as the second coming of Christ? Or, would people just chuck-it-up as an 'unexplained flying object' or 'UFO' of the week, and forget about it within a 24 or 48hr news cycle.

In this day and age of Marvel comics and superheros flying with bright colour capes and laser burning eyes, would people actually bow down and worship the descending Jesus, coming with the clouds, or would people be too busy recording with their cellphones, or even rushing towards the landing so to take a selfie with Christ? I wonder.

Today is the last Sunday in the Christian calendar. It is traditionally a day to celebrate the Reign of Christ—to acknowledge his dominion, his power and his glory. Speaking of glory, I have to say that it really is an abstract concept.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines glory as public praise, honor and fame; something that brings praise or fame to someone or something. The Cambridge dictionary agrees with the praise, honor and fame aspects, but introduces the idea that glory is something one earns by doing something successfully.

In the Bible, the word 'glory' most often describes the splendour, holiness and majesty of God. Glory of God is both seen and unseeable. Seen, in the sense that our naked eyes could actually see the glory of God. Unseeable, in the sense that one must pay a dear price for seeing even a tiny glimpse of that glory.

In Isaiah 6, the prophet was taken in a vision, to the heavenly throne room. Having seen the glory of the Lord God, he cried out "*Woe to me. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.*" (Isaiah 6:5) Evidently, the prophet knew that he was where he was not supposed to be, and he had seen what he was not supposed to have seen.

Ezekiel didn't have problem seeing the glory of God in the inaugural vision of chapter 1. Not only did he see it, he wrote it down, described that glory in detail in verse 25-28. There was a vault, the Hebrew equivalent of the sky. A voice was above the vault. A throne was above the voice, in what looked like a throne made of lapis lazuli, of bright blue precious stone. High above the throne was a figure that looked like a man, but was made up of an unknown substance which the prophet calls it: **לְמַשְׁמָל** (chashmal)—translated in certain English version of the Bible as 'glowing metal' or 'gleaming amber'.

That description of not only the glory of God, but the actual substance that constitutes the God-self was so offensive to the rabbis, that they actually forbid anyone under the age of 30 to read the opening chapter of the book, thinking only a mature mind with years of study of the Torah could handle such a text. A story was circulated among rabbinic students that a bright young man once got curious. He opened the book of Ezekiel without permission, read the opening chapter, and came across the word **לְמַשְׁמָל** (chashmal). Inexplicably he understood it, and at that precise and profound moment of comprehensive, he was immediately consumed by fire and was no more.

The point that I want to highlight, to stress is this: **handle the glory of God at one's own risk, and hopefully with a lot of care.**

Which brings us to the Old Testament text that was read earlier, to Daniel 7:9, where the prophet describes a vision of what is to take place, *"As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient of Days took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence."* Here God is seen as an old man with white hair, seated on a throne, with fiery power beyond our comprehension, emanating from him. Then in the following verse, *"A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened."*

What this apocalyptic vision describes is the day of the final judgement, where all people and all nations will all come before the throne of God. It is the end of something but the beginning of something else. It is bad news for some but good news for others.

The first one to come under judgement is a perverse power, which the Scripture calls it 'the beast'. That beast may have many horns, as

power often corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The beast would be put to death, their dominion taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a brief time, limited as it were, and perhaps a chance to repent.

Daniel's vision continues, in verse 13, a often quoted verse in the New Testament: *"I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him."* Like a son of man, or in Aramaic: כְּבָר אֲנָשׁ (kebar enesh), could be simply translated as 'like a human being'. Just like in Ezekiel when God addressed the prophet, God often used a similar phrase: (ben adam), or son of Adam, to highlight the mortal part of the prophet.

It should be noted that Jesus made a number of references to this verse, to the point that 'the son of man' is almost like a title he prefers to address himself. *"To [the Son of Man] was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."* As you could image how offensive that self-address was to Torah abiding Jews of his day, that Jesus was constantly challenged, opposed, and eventually paid dearly for it on the cross.

It should also be noted that in the early church, Stephen, one of the first seven deacons chosen by the Apostles and the community of faith. When he was brought before the religious court of Sanhedrin, he gave a long sermon condemning them for crucifying Jesus. But it wasn't until Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and referenced Daniel 7:13, *"Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"* It wasn't until then did those Torah abiding religious leaders of the day became near crazy. They covered their ears, shouting loud gibberish so to overcome what they were not suppose to hear, then they dragged Stephen outside and stoned him to death.

It is to such a blasphemous act, that Apostle John in Revelation 1:7 invites all of us to look unabashedly, *"Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all peoples on earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."* And to such a vision, the Lord God gave a personal stamp of approval saying, *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."*

Vision of the glory of Christ, of the Lord God Almighty is what we are invited to look, to imagine, and to envision on this Sunday of the Reign of Christ. The hope for the second coming of Christ is for some, an extension of a nagging disappointment of the first coming. Somewhat cynically, Alfred Loisy, the Roman Catholic priest and theologian, once said, “Jesus preached the kingdom of God; but what came was the church.”

I guess I could understand where he is coming from. What we have here today, on earth is far from perfect. The world is broken, and the Church, in all honesty not much better. But I do hold on to the belief that the delay in the final coming, as Apostle Peter explains in his second epistle, *“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”* (2 Peter 3:9)

It is by God’s mercy and grace, that the humanity was not all together judged during the first coming, at the foot of the cross. It is by God’s mercy and grace, that the church is commissioned to preach the good news of the Gospel. The good news that I have often repeated when pronouncing the Assurance of Pardon: Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ—and Christ died for us; Christ rose for us; Christ reigns in power for us; Christ prays for us.

So friends, sisters and brothers in Christ. Hope in the second coming of Jesus, when all knees shall bow, all tongues shall confess that He is indeed Christ. Yet, see that the Reign of Christ is already here, at work in our everyday lives, steadily...faithfully.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.