

Christ Before Me

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As you may have already noticed this morning is a little different than usual. This morning we want to celebrate with you both the Front Porch college ministry and our recent missions trip to the Dominican Republic. So, get excited as these young men and women lead us in worship, as they share their hearts for Christ with us... Amen.

Good Morning

It's an honor and a pleasure to be able to speak with you all this morning. Our texts this morning are taken from Matthew's gospel- 17:1-2 and 25:34-40

Mathew 17:1-2

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we

saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

This is the word of the Lord...

A couple of weeks ago as many of you know my family and I took a trip with seven Front PORCH students to the Dominican Republic. It was an amazing trip, and a part of what we want to share with you this morning is just how amazing this trip was.

Now while we were down there during the day we split up from each other to go to different ministry sites. Student’s International has it set up so that students can participate in missions in their particular field of interest... So if you’re interested in education there are several opportunities there, or if you’re interested in Art they have an art site, or if you’re interested in medicine or dentistry they have sites specifically geared toward those interests. So during the day we split up, but before we went anywhere we worshipped together every morning with the other teams from Taylor University and Whitenbury Church, and with the staff of students international, and that was wonderful. And then in the evenings I was responsible to lead a team time—a small group for the week so to speak. And I decided that I would take this time to teach from a book I had just started reading, **Christ My Companion, Meditations on the Prayer of St. Patrick**. I thought it might be appropriate because St. Patrick of course was a missionary and we were on a missions trip, and he went to an Island and we were on an Island, and Ireland is really green, and the Dominican Republic is really green. And the prayer goes something like this...

Christ be with me, Christ within me,

Christ behind me, Christ before me,

Christ beside me, Christ to win me,

Christ to comfort and restore me.

And every night we'd take just one section of this prayer and talk about what it meant for us, what it means in the context of missions, what it may have meant for St. Patrick. And so this morning I want to do something very similar with you. I want to take just one section of this prayer—my favorite phrase you might say and talk about it. What it means to me, and for us, and for this mission that God has us on.

The phrase as you may have guessed is “Christ before me.” What does it mean—Christ before me? I suppose our most immediate thought might be that Christ goes before me, as in ahead of me, to prepare the way. We see God doing this time and again with Israel. Moses says to an anxious Israelite crowd in Deuteronomy, “The Lord himself goes before you... God will never leave nor forsake you. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged.” God goes before us as a way of comforting us... Wherever we are in life God has already been, and makes it safe by God's very presence. I think St. Patrick probably meant this too. It was a comfort to him when he prayed this prayer—God has already gone before me to this island, to this place, the way has already been prepared.

But I think also the ambiguity of the prayer is purposeful. I think St. Patrick often means a multiplicity of things by these phrases. We might also read “Christ before me” as Christ “in front” of me “standing before” me. That directly in front of us is always, Jesus...

We read in Matthew's gospel chapter 17 that Jesus was before a small group of his disciples in a way He had never been before. In fact in this chapter we see Jesus in a way that he hadn't revealed Himself before nor since. We commonly call it the Transfiguration. The transfigured Christ before us...

v. 1 reads, Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

Immediately the reference to “six days” indicates to us that something very important is about to take place. In six days God created the heavens and the earth; for

six days Moses waited on Mt. Sinai for God to reveal the Ten Commandments; for six days we work and on the seventh we rest.

And then we hear that Jesus is doing some small group ministry of his own, for he only takes three with him, Peter, James and John. This also indicates that something important is about to happen. Something that can't happen in the larger group, it's *intimate*, it has to *be experienced* and *then told*. And the three also reflects something else—for Moses took with him three to the top of Mt. Sinai (Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu) where Moses met God face to face, and where we're told the face of Moses "lit-up."

And of course we're on a mountaintop... Yet another indicator of something important coming up. In fact Jewish belief and tradition is very much tied in with mountains. Yahweh was God of the mountains according to Jewish tradition. This was a way of explaining to foreigners that Yahweh was bigger than the gods they worshipped... My god is the god of the mountains! And it's on mountaintops that we find so much divine activity in the Scriptures. All of this in order to tell us that the Christ that is about to be before us is something holy, different, special.

We read then in v. 2, **And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.**

And here, more than any other time in Scripture Jesus true nature is revealed-- after six days had passed, with just a small group of followers, high on a mountaintop, soon to be joined by Moses and Elijah on a shining cloud—Jesus face shone (literally "lamped-up") before them like the sun, white as light, with a cloud of light, with Father's voice of approval, Jesus *is transfigured*. The Greek word here is *metemorphothe*, Jesus metamorphosizes into what He has always been, true God of true God, glorious, unimaginably beautiful, frighteningly awesome—In fact in just a few moments Peter is going to be scrambling to build altars just to do something that seems somewhat appropriate for such an amazing occasion. We have nothing else like this in the New Testament. And lasts but for only a moment, and then its back down the mountain, back into "real life." Back down the hard road to the cross.

I don't know about you but I crave for moments like this with Jesus. I want the transfigured Jesus to show up in my life. I want to see Jesus' power revealed right before my eyes because I think it would help me trust; I think maybe it might rattle my cage a little bit; I think maybe it just might keep me going when I get really tired.

When you go on a missions trip often times we go some place far away. And there are several reasons for this. For one, I really want to expose my students and my family and myself to the needs of others globally. I really want to pull my students and myself out of our comfort zones because it grows and stretches us. And I love the sense of accomplishment that a missions team feels when they've done it—they've raised the funds they've gotten to the airport in one piece, they're on the plane, on their way... and later the sense of accomplishment when they've seen so much and been stretched to their limits, and we've had our hearts stretched, even broken.

But man it's exhausting! Especially the travel. It's like climbing Kilimanjaro or something. 19 hours with two toddlers, and cramped planes, and short layovers, with long long long flights. *And I get tired.* And so we arrive in the DR a couple of weeks ago and I'm already ready to go home. Because I know what's coming up next isn't going to be any kind of vacation... It's going to be hard work. And we're going to see things that are hard to see. And I'm thinking to myself what have I gotten myself into. I was already tired. I feel like I just moved across the country yesterday from CO to CA, and now I'm halfway across the globe staring hurt, pain, poverty in the face. And it's in moments like these in my life I really crave that transfigured Jesus-- Christ before me—and I find myself praying, "Come on Jesus, show yourself, light-up, blow my mind, because I'm tired and I'm cranky and I just got here." And the ugly thing that happens in me sometimes, I don't know if this ever happens to you, is I even get a little demanding and cross at the end of 19 hours of travel with two toddlers. But I found myself kind of wishing, maybe even asking for a bit, "Jesus, don't show me the hurting, don't show me poverty; **show me your power**—and if we could do that on a beach that would be great. Christ before me, just on my terms please. [pause]

When we turn to Matthew chapter 25 Jesus is telling the last parables he'll ever tell. Jesus is teaching his disciples through story for the last time. These words of Jesus

are so important to Matthew—they are Jesus’ last—and Matthew really wants us to hear these words, to remember them. And in the last parable, the last story of all Jesus talks about his own return. A transfigured King Jesus returning, not a poor homeless Rabbi, but a king, a glorious king on a shining throne surrounded by angels.

And this king says to His people, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’ the kingdom Jesus went *before* us to prepare he now stands *before* us to announce.

And then this last parable takes this wild turn, and Jesus says the strangest thing. The glorious Christ before us, the King Christ, the transfigured Christ says...

for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

And then Jesus’ people quite shocked respond...

‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food- you’re a king-, or thirsty and gave you something to drink- you’re the God that made water-? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you- because Kings aren’t strangers, being king kind of carries popularity with it as one of those kingly benefits-, or naked- my God my king I’ve never seen you naked... I swear, because that would be weird- And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?- You don’t get sick you end sickness and you set free the prisoner???’

and Jesus says to his people...

‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Now I want us to pause for a moment and just think over a few things. And the first is this; notice how basic the ministry of Jesus’ kingdom is. Notice it doesn’t say I was hungry and you ended world hunger, or I was sick and you healed me, or I was a prisoner and you liberated me. No, it says you fed me, and you welcomed me, and you visited me. The ministry of God’s kingdom is not about fixing the world, or setting things right (God’s is doing that). The ministry is simple and anyone can do it... feed, clothe, welcome, visit. There isn’t a person in this room this morning who cannot participate in this kingdom life that Jesus offers—it’s for everyone. God’s Kingdom isn’t for the elite few who can do amazing feats of ministry—No, the highest accolades in God’s Kingdom are given to the simplest of ministries; feeding, clothing, welcoming, visiting.

I want us also to notice this. Jesus directly associates himself with the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low, the sickest of the sick. It doesn’t say, “Well, it was like I was sick, or like I was in prison, or like I was hungry.” The text says I was, I was, I was, it was me, me, me. “just as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.”

Now the early church loved this language. Loved that Jesus identified himself so intimately, so directly with people. The folks that St. Patrick himself would have studied before taking off on this crazy mission to this wild Island with my crazy ancestors on it, the folks he read up on were famous for saying things like this,

“You saw your brother or sister, you saw the Lord.”

Or

“When you have seen your brother or sister you have seen your God.”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we reclaimed that kind of language in our church? When we see each other, when we see folks out on the street, in cars, in the grocery, we’ve seen our God.

Now we were just down in the Dominican, and like I was saying I was so tired. Like right when I got there tired, not even mid-week tired. And I'm teaching this prayer to my students, Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, and I'm praying this prayer each day for myself. Jesus show up. Show me your power. And like I was saying I was even a little bitter about the circumstances. I was just too tired to see poverty, to see pain, to see the least of these. I needed some fuel in the fuel tank. I desperately needed to see the Transfigured Jesus before me. But I had reason to believe given our location and our obligation for the week I wasn't going to see any such thing.

And so the second day we're there we go to all our prospective ministry sites and my wife, my wonderful wife has decided to spend the week with the special needs kids in the community. Truly, truly, truly the least of these. And we hear all these horror stories about the lives of these children when they leave school each day; a girl her has a wheelchair at school but not at home, because her parents are afraid to take responsibility for it, so she's forced to either lie in the bed or crawl on the floor to get around, and another little girl with down syndrome who's terrified of the bathroom and the missionaries don't even want to imagine what's happening at home that makes this so. And this boy, this drooling snot-faced boy who smells awful and hits everybody and cries all day because his broken mind can't find any other way to communicate. And I was there with my wife that second day. I was just there to observe and to take some pictures and some video, so we could show you all something of the trip. And I was already tired, and grouchy, and jet-lagged and just trying to put on a smile and a friendly pastor face.

And about mid-day my son Asher is out at recess and he looks overwhelmed by all the commotion, and I'm overwhelmed by all the commotion. And so I go to pick him up, to get him off the ground and in my arms. And then I see *him* coming this other boy who hits and screams and smells. And he's gotta be maybe eight or nine or ten, he's no small boy when you look at him, but you can tell in his mind he's maybe two or three. And he's on the approach and I'm thinking this kid is at exactly the

wrong level to be hitting me while I'm holding Asher (if you know what I mean). And he walks right up to me and stops and puts his arms up...

And I don't know quite what to make of it. Except it looks like he wants me to pick him up, but he's gotta weigh like 75 or 80 pounds, and I'm tired and grumpy, and I have this thing about people touching me, and germs and smells and this just isn't my style. And I'm just there to take photos. But what are you going to do? What am I going to say? Even if I spoke Spanish I'm not sure I could explain to him that this just wasn't my deal.

So I picked him up. And I held him. And he dug his snot-covered face into my shoulder, and he hugged me, and he leaned back and looked at me and I saw his face light up. And I'm not kidding you, and I'm not saying some big mountaintop cg effects thing happened but that little boy's face shone like the sun, and it was Christ before me.

[pause]

You see the transfigured Christ and the Christ in the least of these are one and the same. When we run into the homeless person, those ones who so often say "God Bless You." That's the transfigured Jesus right in front of us. When we see an old friend, when we watch our children play, when we go to the poor. I think we merely need to welcome them, feed them, visit with them, pick them up, and we can see Jesus before us. "Just as you did it to the least of these you did it to me." says Jesus.

In a few moments we're going to be watching a video that one of our DR team members put together. A video of our trip. And I hope that one of the things you all experience this morning, in the worship, in the praying, in the message is a resounding thank you. Thank you for your support, thank you for buying our donuts, thank you for being our church home and church family. I hope also though that we see Christ before us this morning. As you watch this video you see Jesus before you in these students and their servant hearts, in the people they went to serve, in the missionaries that serve there all the time. And I hope and I pray also that we see Christ before us when we leave this place. The transfigured Christ, in each other, in our friends, in our family, and in the least of these. Will you pray with me? Pray for offering