

Christ The Thief

Luke 12:32-40; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15

In his letter to the young congregation at Thessalonica, Paul writes:

“About dates and times, my friend, we need not write to you, for you know perfectly well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night.” - (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2)

The day of the Lord is when the Lord has a day with us, and whether it is in our personal experiential history now or at the end of all history, that encounter is like an encounter with a thief in the night.

“Christ the thief” doesn’t seem like a good advertising strategy. In a book (Jesus As They Saw Him) devoted to the titles and interpretations applied to Jesus, William Barclay deals with forty-two such titles, ranging from the Divine Physician to the Stone, from the Bread of Life to the Bright Morning Star. But he does not deal with the thief. And yet, from our scriptures this morning we see that the writers did not hesitate to speak of Christ as a robber.

The title and concept of thief that was applied to Christ did not come out of Jesus' Jewish heritage but was derived from a picture that Jesus painted as seen in the Luke story that was read this morning.

‘But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.’ - Luke 12:39-40

Three other New Testament writers picked up this motif. Paul, as we have already noted, states that "the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night." Peter also asserts: "Yet it remains true that the day of the Lord will come as suddenly and unexpectedly as a thief" (2 Peter 3:10). Twice John, in the Book of Revelation, reiterates the image: "If you refuse to wake up", he writes the church in Sardis, "then I will come to you like a thief, and you will have no idea of the hour of my coming." (Rev. 3:3; 16:15)

If this is true, then we are left with the intriguing suggestion that there were three thieves, not just two, crucified on Golgotha. On the middle cross was Christ the Thief. "I will come to you like a thief", he said, "and you will have no idea of the hour of my coming." (Rev. 3:3). He claimed for himself the designation of thief. So, what may all this mean for our lives?

First, this: Christ is the thief in the sense that his encounter with us may have the element of his stealing up on us; it may be uninvited and unexpected. (Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics)

As Hans Lilje (The Last Book of the Bible) puts it:

"The Lord comes like a thief in the night, that is, secretly, suddenly, unexpectedly."

How I became a candidate for ministry without even asking.

My story. Raised in the church - Sunday School - Scouting Programs - While in my last year at high school our Youth Group did the worship based on the Beatles Song, "Revolution". Play the song but no video in those days. Talked about the Church and its message needing major change. After grade 13 graduation I went to University of Waterloo for computers and math. I quit going to church. Near the end of the first year a friend wanted me to go to Emmanuel United Church with her. The message was very different - it made sense to me - it changed my opinion of church. I called my home minister and asked if I would see him near the end of April, 1971. Met with him in his office. There were two other that I new sitting him. After awhile my home minister turned to them. They said they had made the correct decision earlier that week. I was asked to attend North Bay Presbytery held at Powassan United Church on Saturday. To my surprise and without asking our filling out any paperwork I became a candidate for ministry on Saturday, April 24, 1971. Like a thief, God had sneaked up on me, uninvited and unexpectedly, and I became a Candidate without ever asking.

Christ's coming is not so much a question of some far-off event that can be picked up on radar of Christ literally descending from the skies with thousands of angels in train. Such literalism presupposes that Christ is absent and has to return! Rather, as Bishop Robinson asserts, this theme of Christ's coming, or his Second Coming, "stands for the conviction that -- however long it takes -- Christ must come into everything ... At any moment, when you least expect it, he may come into your life -- like a burglar at dead of night or the boss walking in when you thought he was on the other side of the world." (J.A.T. Robinson, *But That I Can't Believe*) My becoming a candidate for ministry. This is the mystery of Christ the thief who steals up on us, uninvited and unexpectedly, and in the encounter, has his day and all of life becomes different from then on.

Another facet of this theme of Christ the thief: Some maintain that the only point of comparison between Christ and the thief is the element of suddenness and unexpectedness and beyond that, the analogy cannot be pushed. But this is debatable. I believe one can argue that there is a real sense in which Christ robs us of something. The New Testament writers "did not hesitate to speak of Christ as a robber", as Minear has pointed out, because "they recognized that the Messiah takes from men the treasure in which they have trusted..." (P. Minear, *Christian Hope and the Second Coming*)

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian, makes the claim that when the crowd cried for the release of Barabbas the robber instead of Jesus, they cried for Barabbas because "the other", namely Jesus, "was a far more terrible robber. For what is it after all to have assaulted travelers on the highway perhaps a dozen times, what is that compared to Jesus assault upon the whole human race and upon the very notion of what it is to be a human!" (S. Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself*) The thief may steal my money; I disagree with that action and react; but both the thief and I agree that having money is important. Or again, the slanderer will undercut, will steal my good reputation or my name in the community; against such violation of my honour I react; but both the slanderer and I are agreed however on the point that honour and reputation are significant. We are agreed on values.

Now Christ is the thief at a different level. When you encounter the Christ of whom it is said -- "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20) -- you encounter one who steals away the notion that a human is to be judged by the amount of real estate that can be accumulated. Remember the parable last Sunday about the Jesus calling the man a fool who sank his life into the enterprise of tearing down barns and building bigger ones (Luke 12:20). Christ is after us here so that we do not confuse livelihood with building a life, taking away what many of us regard as treasure..

Or again, when the New Testament can say of Jesus, "He made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a slave" (Phillipines 2:7) - we are encountered by one who doesn't steal our reputation by slimy gossip, but you certainly encounter one who steals away the overwhelming, secret desires of many of us that we will have arrived when we are top dog in our realm!

Now when one encounters Christ he becomes the thief because he takes the glory of riches of this world away -- not by appropriating them, but by devaluating them, by revealing their ultimate weakness. "What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26). He robs us of the valuation of this world and substitutes in its place that which nothing can steal, the reminder that we are the "Children of God" (1 John 3:2). We are sent out into our daily world to follow a particular way and build a community. When Jesus, the Thief, robs us of the one treasure, the world's treasure, he gives another that is not touched by the fluctuations of the market or the bony fingers of death.

Christ is the thief in the sense that he is one who will steal up on humankind and put an end to humankind's time. Sometime, somewhere, on the frontiers of my life, my time, my loan of life reaches its end. Humankind can go on as if his or her life had no accounting, but the Lord will have a day.

In T.S. Eliot's *Choruses From 'The Rock'* the Stranger is depicted as coming to the urban person. The poem says in part:

When the Stranger says: 'What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?'
What will you answer? 'We all dwell together
To make money from each other'? or 'This is a community'?
And the Stranger will depart and return to the desert.
O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger,
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

Another quote from T.S. Eliot's *Choruses From 'The Rock'* sums it all up:

"What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God."

A reminders of where we began:

"The day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night." (1 Thessalonians 5:2)