

Scriptures for All Saints Day: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

M.C. Escher is one of my favorite artists. He's the guy who did the pencil drawings featuring things like two hands drawing each other and a set of stairs that endlessly cycled back upon itself. Escher is great because you can't just glance at his work for a moment and get it. It compels you to stare at it for a long time, wondering if your eyes are playing tricks on you, and marvel at the imagination it must take to even think of things like this, which are impossible in real life. His art forces us to stretch the bounds of our understanding and reconsider what really is possible.

I wonder if hearing Jesus speak had a similar effect on people. In first century Palestine, everybody understood how the world worked. Might made right. They were living under the Roman Empire, after all. The Romans got to rule most of the known world because they had the biggest military, the most money, and were willing to do whatever it took to secure their power base. The amount of resources in the world was finite, so you did whatever you had to do to make sure you got as big a share as you could. But here's this preacher from Nazareth telling an entirely different story.

Here's Jesus saying that things like meekness, being persecuted, and being merciful in a merciless world are actually blessings from God! This is Jesus' first recorded teaching in Matthew's gospel, and it sets the tone for his ministry as described in all four gospels. Jesus is forcing us to radically rethink the priorities and value systems around which we orient our lives. On the one hand there's the story told by the empire (the ruling powers of the world) that says that the material realities of this life are the entirety of all creation, so material gain and success are the stick by which we measure individual worth. On the other hand, there's the story that Jesus is telling, which tells us there is a higher reality than what we can perceive with our five senses, and that this higher reality and the priorities that flow out of its being are to dictate how we live our lives in the world.

Jesus didn't just tell this story, he lived it out. He spent time with those who were considered outcasts by the world, and even by the religious system. He taught, ate with, and healed all people, regardless of where they fell in the societal class structure. Jesus forced the people of his day—and us as well—to consider a different story, a different understanding of what was really possible, and to consider that all they had ever known, or could know, might not be all there is.

This Sunday, we are celebrating All Saints, where we remember those who have passed from this life who have chosen to orient their lives around the story of Jesus as opposed to the stories offered in this world. A passage from Revelation makes a rare appearance in the lectionary cycle, and in it we find that those who get special recognition in the Kingdom are those who have chosen to orient their lives around the story of Jesus, and as a consequence have “come out of the great ordeal,” paying a heavy price for living by a different story than the rulers of the world.

Texts like this are often used to condemn those outside of the Christian faith and reinforce the desire to feel superior to others, saying “they'll get theirs in the end!” While Revelation was written to people experiencing heavy persecution, and they undoubtedly felt comforted by the promise of future public justification, John is not trying to say that one group will end up being favored over another. That's just a Christianized version of the world's story. Instead, this text is trying to give comfort to those who have become so weary from walking this difficult road that Jesus calls us to that they begin to think that switching over to the world's story would just be easier. And maybe it would be. But the example of the countless saints over the years who have chosen the story of Jesus over the story of the world, and ultimately have left the world a much better place than they found it, have shown us that the more difficult road, the one with the delayed rewards, is ultimately the better one.

