

## ADVENT 1, Dec. 2, 2018, Year C

- With your worship bulletin you will find a copy of a remarkable painting by Richard Mudariki. He is a black African, born in Zimbabwe, who later moved to South Africa. His painting is titled, *The Last Judgement* {note handout}. It is obviously indebted to its namesake by Michelangelo. Yet, given the recognizable figures Mudariki has portrayed, his painting is obviously *political* in its conception. With *this particular* content, his title may seem *ironic* or even *cynical*. Especially because the painting *diverges from* recognizable biblical imagery, and appears to deviate from traditional Christian doctrine. And *yet...*, if *this is how we perceive it*, our response may be based on an *unexamined assumption*. For when we think about the Last Judgement, and *what it calls to account*, we may have too narrow a starting point. Because our 'final accounting before God' will be *about much more than* simply *our personal sins* and *private shortcomings*.
- So here is our challenge when we view this painting: It's that we often treat some matters *as a clear either / or*, when they might better be understood in *both-and ways*. In Christian doctrine, the Last or Final Judgement is *just as much about things* that are *public* and *political*, as it is about *things that are personal* and *private*. Of course, *we –as individuals– do sin*. And we sin in *all kinds of personal* and *private* ways. *Yet, communities also sin*. Through their *leaders and supporters, nations commit sin, and are often guilty of it*. *Slavery*, and the policy of *apartheid*, are among the most notorious examples of sin committed by *communities* and *nations*. So, as wise and faithful souls know, *Our Lord condemns these evil beliefs and practices, and he brings upon them his grieving judgement*.
- At first it seems *incongruous* for the artist to portray Nelson Mandela in the *central position* where, *following Michelangelo*, we expect to see *our Lord*. The image of Queen Elizabeth, *next to him*, compounds our surprise. She has been placed in the position given to Mary, the Lord's mother, in Michelangelo's famous mural. Here, once again, our assumptions may be

## ADVENT 1, Dec. 2, 2018, Year C

getting in the way. Whereas Michelangelo, following the tradition, set out to depict the *entirety* of the Last Judgement, Richard Mudariki is exploring a *more limited and symbolic aspect of it*. His rationale for portraying the scene in this way, may become clearer to us by considering [a historical approach to the liturgy of Christian burial](#).

- The casket of a priest is brought into a church for a funeral in a markedly *different way* from how a lay person's casket is brought in. A lay person's body is brought in *feet first*. So his or her body is poised *facing liturgical east* ~ the direction of the resurrection and Christ's return at the end of time. But a priest's body is brought in *head first*. This symbolizes how, *at the second coming and the Final Judgement, priests face their people*. This models *our accountability*, not only to our Lord *but also to our people*, whose spiritual care has been entrusted to us. Therefore, *symbolically, we face them, rather than our Lord, at the Last Judgment*.
- *And so*, according to *this interpretation*, *recognizable political and religious figures* like Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa and Archbishop Tutu *face us, the viewers of this painting*. They *all* may appear *worthy* in our eyes. Yet, *also facing us* are *upside-down figures* like Adolf Hitler and, *perhaps* surprisingly, Margaret Thatcher. They are depicted as descending to be *among the damned*, when the *final trumpets* are blown, to be in the company of Che Guevara and Mao tse tung.<sup>1</sup> *In their affirmation or in their condemnation, all these figures face us* because of the 'ministry' of public leadership that was entrusted to them.
- This should remind us of *one ground of our hope* ~ that, *whatever we may think of our present political leadership in this country*, *there is a higher accountability* than which is reckoned by voting and elections. *Whether we are leaders, followers or critics, we all will* stand before the discerning eyes

of our Lord. *Just as we will stand before* the discerning eyes of our communities.

- Mudariki includes in his painting a figure who has stood up well to the scrutiny of history. It's [Archbishop Trevor Huddleston](#), portrayed in a mitre and white vestments. I had the privilege of hearing him preach in Oxford, in the spring of 1978. He was a *heroic* Anglican Archbishop of the Province Indian Ocean, which includes South Africa. He preceded, and was a mentor to, Desmond Tutu, who has extensively praised him. The archbishop was also lauded by Nelson Mandela, who said this about him: "[no white person has done more for South Africa than Trevor Huddleston.](#)"<sup>2</sup>
- The dramatic character of Richard Mudariki's painting is consistent with the symbolic imagery and language that we find in Luke's Gospel this morning. Just as we want to *avoid* 'reading' Mudariki's painting *too literally*, we want *thoughtfully* to attend to what Luke tells us. From him, we hear Jesus' last words in Jerusalem, before the plot to kill him unfolds. They evoke a [warning against relying too much upon the present order of things for our stability and security](#). Influenced by [the prophet Daniel](#), Luke has in mind Jesus' confrontation with [the fallen powers of this world, and their earthly representatives](#). This should remind us of the imagery we heard last week in Revelation. Yet, Jesus' words [here](#), about "[the Son of Man coming in a cloud](#)," may not therefore be a *prediction of the anticipated "second coming"*. Instead, his words may refer to [how "the Son of Man" is vindicated before the throne of the Ancient One in heaven](#). His vindication in the presence of the Father confirms his kingship and dominion [over all peoples, nations and languages](#).<sup>3</sup>
- Some things here are worth remembering. The Final Judgment *is and always will be the work of the Lord*, based upon *divine* rather than *human* discernment. It is *given* to us, *even required* of us, to make judgments every

## ADVENT 1, Dec. 2, 2018, Year C

day about acts and choices that lie before us. We learn from the past and present actions of others and ourselves, as we increase the wisdom of our perception. *Yet, it is not given to us to speculate about the *final disposition of other people, as this is a matter for God's judgement alone*.* Richard Mudariki may appear to have ignored this principle, though *I don't think he did*. For I doubt he *claims to know who* will *finally* be condemned. Yet, he feels free to *imagine the moral significance of public actions* that will *likely* receive such judgment.

- *All of us, in addition to being fully **accountable to our Lord**, bear varying degrees of **accountability to each other**. We are born *into communities, nurtured and shaped by communities*. And, we go on to influence communities by *what we do*, and by *what we leave undone*.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, *we cannot pretend* that we are *alone*, or that our actions are *not* significant to others ~ especially to *those with whom are bound together in the covenant community of the Lord's Body*. *That we are* accountable to one another *helps us be aware* of our *potential* to cause harm. *Yet, this also helps us be conscious of how we can build each other up*. And, we can *encourage* others *as they grow* into the fuller stature of Christ. *For we shall all stand before him, at what we pray will be our 'final affirmation.'**
- "And so, to him who sits upon the throne, and to Christ the Lamb, be worship and praise, dominion and splendor, for ever and for evermore."<sup>5</sup>



**Luke 21:25-36**

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. **Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.** Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that **the kingdom of God is near.** Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. **Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.**"

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> These and other figures portrayed in the painting are identified in the credits of a video created by the artist. See the video, *the last judgment* [sic], which may be accessed through this link, <https://player.vimeo.com/video/66654899>.

<sup>2</sup> See the Wikipedia article on Trevor Huddleston, and the photograph of the bronze bust on which an inscription with this quote from Mandela is located, in Huddleston's birthplace, in Bedford, England. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trevor\\_Huddleston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trevor_Huddleston), accessed 26Nov18.

<sup>3</sup> See Daniel 7, especially vs. 13-14, which appears to stand behind Luke 21:25-28, as well as Revelation 1:5-7. For background insight see, for example, N.T. Wright's commentary on this passage in his book, *Luke for Everyone*, available in paperback and in ebook editions.

<sup>4</sup> This phrasing follows from the Confession of Sin, appointed for use in The Holy Eucharist, Rite II, BCP: 360.

<sup>5</sup> A quote from the last stanza of Cantic 18, "A Song to the Lamb," BCP:93-94.