

<i>Date Preached</i>	20-Nov-2022	<i>Date Initiated</i>	01-Nov-2022
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 29 (XtC), Yr C

" 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me ¶ in Paradise.' "



I don't know whether you saw it, but this past week *The New York Times* ran a lengthy profile of the PBS journalist and anchor Judy Woodruff. She is retiring at the end of the year, and last week, she covered the final election night of her long career. Woodruff is seventy-five years old—one of the last TV journalists still working whom I remember from childhood. When I started watching the news,¹ Walter Cronkite and David Brinkley presided over the airwaves, and Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw were just coming into their own. A female reporter was something new for me, and I remember, if somewhat hazily, Judy Woodruff covering the 1976 presidential campaign as a little-known governor from Georgia made an unlikely bid for the White House.

As retirement ages go, seventy-five is toward the older side, I suppose. It's not remarkable that at her age, Judy is capping her pen and closing her notebook. We do take notice, however, when people retire *not* due to the number of birthdays they've celebrated ... but because they've decided their work is completed. Perhaps the most famous example, in American history, is George Washington, who declined to seek a third term as President.² The author J D Salinger, who published *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, wrote the final major work of his career in 1963, at the age of forty-four; he would live another forty-six years. The child star Shirley Temple quit Hollywood in her early twenties. And following an illustrious twenty-two-year career, Tom Brady famously—or, perhaps infamously—put down the football 'for good' in February 2022 ... only to pick it up again just forty days later.³ There is something in us that admires ... that marvels at ... that makes us curious about ... people who leave their vocations while they still have more 'in them'; people who are sufficiently secure in their having accomplished *enough* ... that they don't feel the need to stay on, to accomplish *everything*.

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In a way, this day—the final Sunday after Pentecost; the Sunday before Advent; a celebration of Christ as King, reigning over creation from His throne in heaven—is an exploration of *Jesus* in 'retirement' ... in *early* retirement, even. As the Church's year draws to a close, we look back and see that we have, once again, journeyed the length, depth and breadth of Jesus' entire earthly life. For the last five-plus months, during the season after Pentecost—some of us call it Ordinary Time—week after week, we've explored His miracles ... examined His teachings ... experienced His humanity and His humility. And before that ... from the beginning of *last* Advent through this past

¹ I was a news junkie (nerd) as a kid. I watched the local and national news every night, and I listened to an all-news station in Philadelphia on the radio at night, in bed.

² This was not entirely a high-principled decision. Washington's popularity had waned during two terms, and an increasingly partisan press was less and less kind to him. He also feared, it is said, that if he died while in office, it could set the precedent of presidency-for-life.

³ Without, it appears, having consulted his wife (now *former* wife).

Easter ... we lifted up, gave thanks for and reflected on the seminal events of His earthly life: from His Nativity ... to the Cross and the Empty Tomb.

And thus, I hear in today's poignant scene between Jesus and one of the men who hang with Him on Calvary⁴ ... shades of Jesus' retirement from earthly ministry. He promises the repentant criminal who asks Him for mercy, "[T]oday, you will be with Me in Paradise." For I am now bound for heaven, says Jesus ... for the un-earthly Eternity that is the more 'accustomed' realm of the Divine. On this first Good Friday, Jesus, as fully divine as He is fully human, knows that His mission in this world is swiftly coming to an end. ¶He has inseparably knit together the earthly creature and the divine Creator ... having conjoined His being to all of ours, as He lay in the Manger. ¶He has taught us how to believe ... how to think ... how to act ... how to serve ... how to pray ... how to love God and one another ... during His ministry throughout Roman Palestine. ¶He has removed from us, forever, the consequences of human sin—that is, everything in our lives that tends to turn us away from God—through His suffering on the Cross. ¶He will, He knows, secure for us eternal joy at the eternal feast of heaven ... as His body—and with it, *all* human bodies—is raised from death. ¶And, in Baptism and Eucharist, He has ordained for us sure and simple ... and also, precious and profound ... means to join, receive and enjoy Him, again and again and again ... until we, too, join Him in Paradise.⁵

Jesus knows, as He hangs upon the Cross, just meters from the Easter Tomb, that His work is complete ... that He has fulfilled the mission God the Father gave Him ... that He has, *IN FINE*, done all that is necessary to restore and **perfect** humanity's relationship with God: to return us, as it were, to Eden-before-the-Apple. Jesus no longer needs to inhabit this world in human form ... as a bridge between wayward-and-bereft mankind and a longing-and-sorrowing God ... because He has abolished, forever, all that ever could—or might ever again—separate us from God. ¶ And thus, having *accomplished enough*, Christ retires to Paradise ... returns to His origin ... His source: to reign, in glory, over a world that He has now returned to God's perfection ... and to wait for us to join Him.

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But it isn't time to say AMEN just yet, is it? For, we said, this is a story of an *early* retirement ... of leaving when one has done *enough*, but not *everything*. For while Christ reigns supreme in heaven ... we slog on in a world that, by most measures and appearances, remains broken and bent. Jesus may have returned creation to the Eden paradise of Genesis, chapter **1**, in *principle* ... but in *practice*, the world we inhabit resembles much more the chaos and brokenness of Sodom and Gomorrah that comes in chapter **19**.

Once again, we confront the uncomfortable paradox of our salvation: We've been forgiven, restored and made whole by Christ, the King ... but it is not His will that we live, just yet, free from the pain, injustice and grief that we humans excel at inflicting on each another.⁶ For Jesus retired from this world having done *enough* ... but not quite *everything*.

⁴ An anglicization of *Golgotha*.

⁵ For completeness, we should acknowledge that there does remain some post-Resurrection 'mop-up' work: He will appear to the women and then the Apostles, to let them know what has taken place. He will send the Holy Spirit, to sustain, comfort and guide us. And He will ascend into heaven, to show us the path.

⁶ The fancy word for this is *theodicy*: the branch of theology that attempts to understand why God, in effect, stands by while God's creatures suffer or encounter pain.

And so, next week, we will begin ... again. We will start a new Church year not with Jesus' *first* coming, but with His *final*. We will ponder how Jesus has promised to come 'out of retirement' ... and move from having accomplished *enough* for the world ... to, finally, accomplishing *everything*. For this is the *first* lesson of Advent. And I invite you to stay tuned!



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT*