

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

Being Made Sufficient

Matthew 23:1–12

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost (All Saints Day)

Analysis by Nathan Hall

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.



DIAGNOSIS: Vaporous Teachers

Step 1: Lack of Integrity

Spanning little pockets across the northern United States is the cross-country skiing community. I know this, because I am an enthusiastic member thereof. If you know anything about cross country skiers (especially those who participate in races and obsess over ski wax and snow properties) you will notice that we are about the nerdiest group of athletes to be found. As such, when our sport is faced with the existential threat of climate change, our default is to evaluate alternatives, lobby, drive energy efficient vehicles, etc.

And the vendors of cross-country ski goods know this to be so. As such they all talk the environmental initiatives they are taking. They will promote videos about “green” ski wax. But hey, they are really just getting rich. They don’t really care about

Protecting Our Winters (POW). They just care about wheedling more money out of us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Resentment

Sure, maybe the marketers have good advice. But we know that they don't really care about the environment. Their hypocrisy is glaring. They like to be greeted in the public spaces as righteous; it is good for prestige and money making.

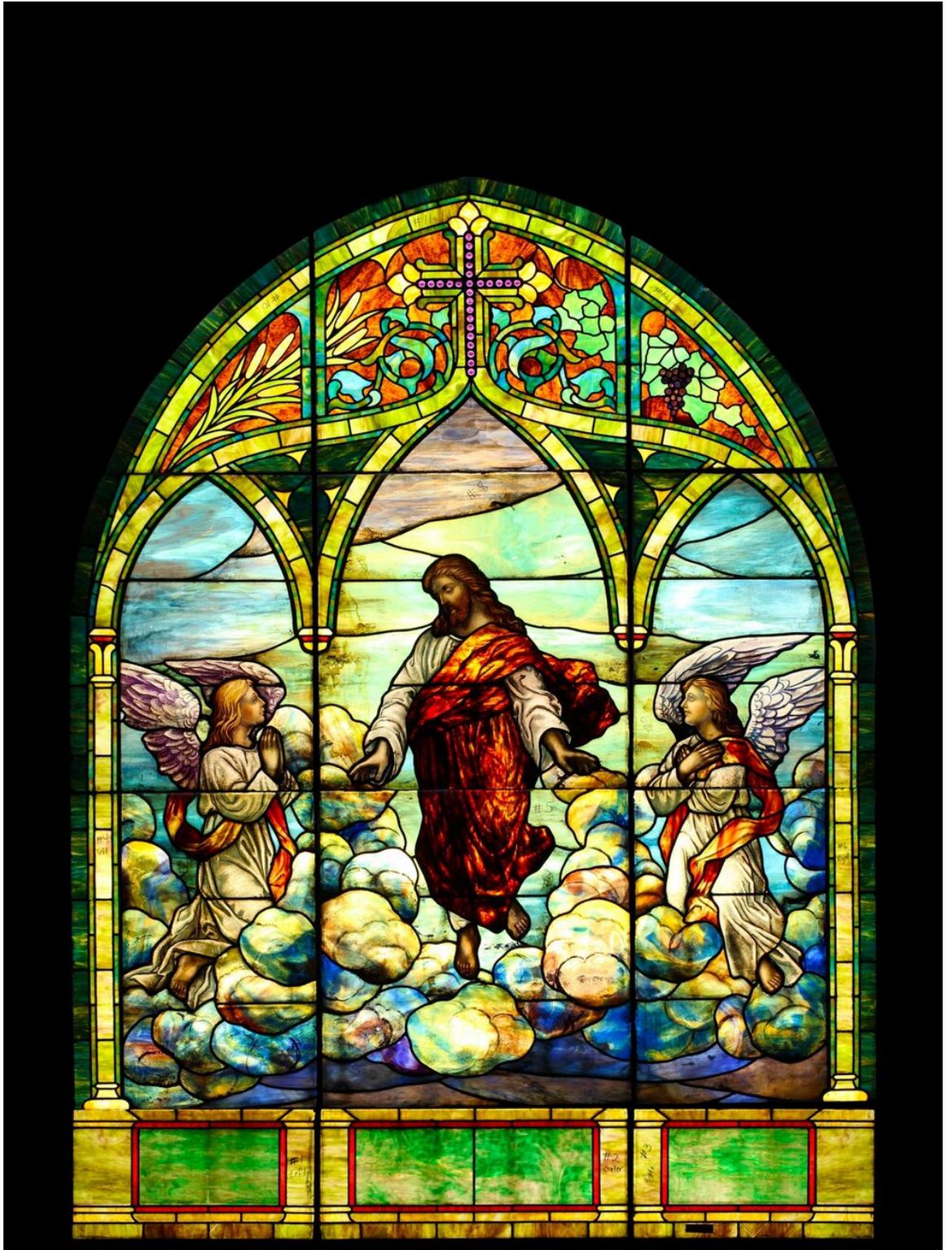
But there is no way that we skiers are all going to fall for that. We know they are a bunch of posers, just in it for the money. And no matter if the side-effect of their monetary pursuits results in a benefit, we reject them. They are not the real deal.

But at the same time, we can't help but feel a little smug. Nothing makes us feel so good about ourselves as looking down on someone else. We thank you, Lord, because, at least we are not like them.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Dead Self-Righteousness

Sadly, our smugness is a give away. It shows that we also have ulterior motives; we do not care so much about solving the problem as we do about appearing on the good side of things. Just like the companies we have been seduced by reputation. In the act of smugly lording it over those vendors, we are captivated by the appearance of our own righteousness, rather than goodness itself. Our own righteousness is a seductive lure. And that will not do. God demands actual goodness, not just comparative goodness. Self-complacency leads to death. When it comes to climate change we know this to be true. Our self-sufficiency is revealed as vanity and vapors.

PROGNOSIS: Substantial Savior



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): A Righteousness That Is Not Our Own

God offers another way. Not a way of self-sufficiency, but one that relies on God's sufficiency. Jesus, the messiah is our one instructor, the greatest who became the servant. Jesus served us by going the way of the cross where our sins and self-righteousness met their death. And instead, Jesus makes us sufficient. We are made absolutely righteous. And so we smug cross-country skiers are free. Free from smug arrogance, but also free from the fragility that comes with such arrogance.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Reconciliation

As often as we live by faith and not by works, we enter a new reality where we have nothing to prove. As such we also have no need to compare ourselves to the corporate sell-outs. Our position is secure. As a forgiven sinner, there is no room for being resentful of other sinners. Instead, we can really desire the best for them, even as we are aware of the hypocrisy. Strangely, encountering real goodness does not drive us away from hypocrites. It drives us to live among them, work alongside them, and bear with their weaknesses.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Integrity

What are the ways that one made righteous by Jesus might care for an unstable environment? They are many. Perhaps through buying solar panels. Perhaps through advocacy. Perhaps by buying the marked-up products of hypocrite corporation. Perhaps through energy audits and carpooling. Perhaps through buying locally produced food. Yet none of these works make the doer righteous. Their demands never end. Yet Christ makes us righteous, and frees us to enter the work.