Beatitudes

by Jessica Kupillas

When we contemplate the world's holiest cities—those all-seeing, all-knowing meccas of divinity—New York City likely wouldn't come to mind. Imagine my bewilderment, then, when living there stirred in me a strange desire to return to church.

This is not to say I have faced any great shocks to the soul in this city—at least, none that would drive me to look for priestly absolution or biblical elucidation. The last time I stepped inside a church seems a lifetime ago, an era tinged by the blush pinks of Barbie dresses and the scabby reds of busted knees. Of course, this was before I began to know myself, and before I was told that there were certain people that God, apparently, didn't want.

However, religious exclusion wasn't exactly why my family and I stopped going. Like dreams, our visits every weekend didn't end so much as fade. We got busier, more distracted, or less enthusiastic, perhaps. Maybe my mother decided it was all right to part with the seemingly immovable religious obligations on which she'd been raised. Whatever the cause, memory soon reduced the church to a passing fad. Now, I retain only fleeting glimpses of the pious life I might've known, had it all gone differently.

However, walking routinely on 10th Street, I'd pass Grace Church on multiple occasions, and each time something tugged at me to go inside. Not a divine sort of tug, mind you, but a *something* tug. A tug like I just needed to see what it was all about in there. There's an indefinable magnetism about the churches in New York that feels different from the churches back home. There, they look more like schools: low, flat,

and uninspiring. Here, they're older, taller, and prouder, somehow. They strike me as more real, more honest. God has never felt real to me, but these buildings do.

In a published portion of his unfinished memoir, *Street Life*, Joseph Mitchell recounts his adventures in New York. Mitchell was a self-proclaimed wanderer, driven by a desire to "keep on walking" regardless of the time or place (64). "Certain streets haunt me and certain blocks of certain streets haunt me and certain buildings on certain blocks of certain streets haunt me," he writes (62). Grace Church is my own 'certain building': I can't qualify its pull or justify my interest, but I am haunted, certainly, and must follow my ghosts.

I go to an evening prayer session on an icy Wednesday evening. The sun has set and I can hear the bells ringing out down the street long before I see the building; it's a sound that claims the sky. The dark, thick wooden doors at the front of the church are propped open; I step through them towards another set of doors, held open for me with a gentle word of welcome. I hold the brief, fanciful thought that I may burst into flames if I walk any further. I remind myself that I'm neither so evil nor so significant as that.

Floating through mahogany pews, I'm struck first by how frightfully quiet it is inside. It's as if the city has stopped within these walls, replaced by towering ceilings, gold-stamped altars, and darkened stained glass windows that, without sunlight peeking through them, appear as little more than smudges, stones at the bottom of a river. I sit down at the back of the sprawling chapel and keep my head down. I am alone, apart from an elderly woman sitting a row or two behind me; I never see her face. A priest makes his way over to us and says his name is Thomas. He's young, probably a little younger than my father. He says we'll begin in a few minutes; I nod and thank him. The elderly woman gets up a minute later and waves to him—she'd only come in for a moment of rest. "Peace be with you," she tells Father Thomas. I've never heard

anybody say that before. It's sweet. It also sounds like something out of *Lord of the Rings*.

The service starts and I find myself with downcast eyes. I stumble over the prayers intended to be said in unison but try to meet every "Amen," whispering behind my mask. Voices chime in from the laptop on the podium. They're broadcasting the service on Zoom and Facebook Live. It's as bizarre as it is charming. A couple more people wander into the chapel to sit, and relief drops into my shoulders. I feel slightly less exposed in their company.

Father Thomas then delivers the Eight Beatitudes, a series of blessings found in the New Testament and attributed to Jesus: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," and so on. I hear "Blessed," the irreverent Simon & Garfunkel tune, in their place, biting guitar riff and all:

Blessed is the land and the kingdom
Blessed is the man whose soul belongs to
Blessed are the meth drinkers, pot sellers, illusion dwellers . . .
Blessed are the stained glass, windowpane glass
Blessed is the church service, makes me nervous
Blessed are the penny rookers, cheap hookers, groovy lookers
O Lord, why have you forsaken me? (Simon)

The Simon & Garfunkel song that comes back to me feels like a different kind of truth, one with which I'm more familiar. But a guilty thought quickly creeps in: am I not allowing myself to see the other side of things? I try to tune back into Father Thomas's station, listening for the music in his recitations.

He says something about "ineffable joys," which God has prepared for those who truly love Him, or Her, or Them. "We are God's children now," he intones, "We know not

what we may be." I don't know if that snippet of wisdom, containing an allusion to Ophelia's line from *Hamlet*, was meant to inspire hope or fear, but the phrase sticks with me—even as the service comes to an end, even as I step back out into the cold blue night. As I exit, the city comes rushing back like a thrashing wave. I'd almost forgotten where I was.

I go to bed. I think and think and think.

We are God's children now; we know not what we may be.

What about knowing what we *are*? If I'm not God's child, if I've never felt like God's child, who am I right now? Spiritually speaking, don't I get to decide whose child I am? And who, then, is to say that the Beatitudes are more correct than "Blessed"? Who's to say that the churches at home are less real than Grace Church and others like it?

Where's the truth in any of it?

We know *not.*

Mitchell frames his wanderlust as a mystery, its precise pull unknown even to him. When he's seized by the need to roam, he feels as though "a change takes place . . . I lose my sense of responsibility" (64). This insatiable desire is, to him, "an aberration;" it leaves him at its mercy (64). He tries to justify his inexplicable urges, citing headaches, the weather, and startling late-night realizations—the kind that make him restless—not the least of which is "the possibility . . . that after death many of us may find out . . . that the eternal and everlasting flames of Hell actually exist" (64). To wander, then, can be in equal measure a means of distraction and a means of investigation for unanswerable questions.

For some, religion, like wandering, is an answer, a path toward enlightenment. God's will can surely explain anything; its mystic applicability eases life's discomforts and uncertainties. It is much more enticing to believe that there is an order to our universe than to confront the possibility that we are merely spinning in chaos.

Tom Stoppard explores this tension between an invisible order and the feeling of chaos in his 1966 play *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, an irreverent take on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Stoppard shifts the focus from Hamlet to two of the play's peripheral figures, placing them at the center of a world in which reality is a mere suggestion and a preordained narrative governs their fates. No clarity is owed to Rosencrantz or Guildenstern; they are not chess players, but rather chess pieces. The play's most omnipotent force is the Player, a character who passes in and out of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's storyline with an occasional modicum of wisdom. In a melodramatic moment, the Player laments the loss of "the single assumption which makes our existence viable—that somebody is *watching*" (63).

Perhaps this is God's most attractive virtue. The notion that He, She, or They is/are the consummate overseer, and all control of the world is afforded and maintained therein. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we hold little control over the cards we are dealt, and endure the silence of an unforgiving universe in response to our collective query: Why? It is comforting to think, instead, that we are being watched, we are not alone, and we belong to something larger than ourselves. We relinquish some control by offering it to God and find fleeting respite in whispering a prayer in a pew at the back of a chapel.

Respite wasn't why Grace Church drew me in, however. I didn't go there to find God or to lay my troubles unto a higher power. Rather, I was drawn to the building itself, the history it held, and the humanness I felt between its seemingly celestial walls.

Grace Church holds countless stories—the very fabric of the human experience—between its walls, not just the Good Book's pages. It is at once a site of peace and a symbol of endurance, miraculously surviving in a world that frequently seems anything but. Initially located in a smaller building on Broadway and Rector Street, Grace Church held its first service in December 1808 ("History"). Despite the interest expressed by several esteemed architects, James Renwick, Jr.—a 25-year-old civil engineer who had yet to design a project of this scale—was commissioned to construct a new, larger chapel in order to accommodate the city's growing population ("History"). Grace went on to serve as a haven for the city's communities, particularly for late nineteenth-century immigrants, providing daycare, employment guidance, and a space for family recreation ("History"). My fascination lies in these human stories that punctuate the church's history: stories of hands outstretched toward disadvantaged newcomers and of chances taken on young, unknown artists.

Today, it stands as a towering cathedral of weathered stone, scaled by the points of intricate spires. The eyes of its windows have seen centuries of change and its floors have supported the tired soles of countless feet. It has lived and breathed and endured for longer than any one of us.

Mitchell also found himself attracted to old churches, recounting an intriguing conversation he had with a priest at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Mitchell, like me, was fascinated most by the church's architecture. The priest found this odd: "As far as I as a priest am concerned, a church is simply four walls and a floor and a roof inside of which the Mass is celebrated. Never mind the ins and outs of the architecture" (67). His logic is admirable; the act of worship is his concern, not where it is performed. I'm interested in this conception of worship, too, these acts *for* God, which in turn are acts *of* humanity. The line between church and God is blurred. If God is the message, then church is the practice, not just the place.

Alexey Kondakov's photography series, *The Daily Life of Gods*, suggests that there is no line *at all* between church and God, between 'reality' and mythology. Kondakov collects images of his hometown, Kyiv, Ukraine, and superimposes figures from classical paintings onto these photographs, visually melding together the past and present across oceans of time. In one image, the figures from Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* are placed in a dark alleyway, reimagining David as the city's vigilante. In another, William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *The Song of the Angels* is dropped into a subway car—Virgin Mary sits with her child, surrounded by three angels playing instruments like buskers on a commute.

These romanticized, mythological figures appearing in ordinary, modern spaces imply that storytelling is cyclical. Humanity's landscape may change, but our roles have not. We can imagine Mary on the subway and David in an alleyway because their biblical narratives endure. The benevolent mother, the scrappy underdog—they are globally recognized archetypes, perfect imitations of who we are or wish to be.

We continue to see suggestions of ourselves in religious stories, substituting aspects of our lives into God's words: but we may not be the heroes: perhaps we're Judas, Goliath, Eve, or the serpent. Indeed, *we know not what we may be.* We consult external interpretations of reality and truth in an attempt to understand our inner workings: all those snarled, nebulous peculiarities for which we find no easy explanation. That is why I stepped into Grace Church. Not to explain, but to question.

I did not receive any divine explanation, if it may be designated as an explanation at all. Rather, I found a distinctly human arrangement of mythos, action and detail, a convenient notation for the natural world: scriptural storytelling. We love these stories most for the pieces of ourselves reflected therein. If we truly wish to claim that we are created in God's image, it is perhaps just as fair to say that God is created in ours.

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