

Last Sunday after Pentecost A 2014: Christ the King

November 23, 2014

Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

It's a surprise! We forget that it's a surprise.

Today is the Last Sunday of our Church year, that Sunday which the Church has given the name, "Christ the King" Sunday. And our Gospel lesson is the parable of the Last Judgment. Christ our King appears as Christ our Judge. And it is only here in all the Gospels that we read of the **criteria** which Christ our Judge *uses* in judging us: the criteria is how we treat one another. "Just as you did or did not care for one of the least of these, you did or did not care for me," Jesus says. And BOTH groups – the sheep and the goats, the compassionate and the uncompassionate – ask, "'**When** did we see you naked and hungry and a stranger and in prison?'" Both the sheep *and* the goats are surprised out of their socks. No one expects to see Jesus in the face of the disadvantaged, the poor, the imprisoned, and all those who are in evident need.

Now the message of this parable, "What you have done for the least of my children, so you have done for me," repeated so powerfully in our opening and closing hymn, is one of the central messages of the Gospel, and has been taught in so many churches and acted upon by so many Christian saints down through the

centuries that we tend to forget how **radical** that message was -- and still is. Echoing countless saints before her, Mother Theresa said, "The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved -- they are Jesus in disguise." We have often heard this (though we rarely put it into practice). We have been taught for so long that we must treat the poor, the hungry, and those in prison as though they were Christ that we forget that the *compassionate* "sheep" in today's parable are *shocked* to discover that Christ was present in the hungry they fed, the naked they clothed, the strangers they welcomed, and the prisoners they visited. But if they didn't care for the hungry, naked, and those in prison because they saw **Christ** in the "least of these", why DID they do it?

I would suggest it may be because they saw **themselves** in the hungry, the naked, those in prison, the least of these. "Love your neighbor who is as yourself," is another way of translating the Second Great Commandment. Those homeless persons living under the Fourth Street Bridge, those people staying at the Shelter at Loaves and Fishes, those people eating at the free luncheons at Mercy Today or the Methodist Church – those people are you and I, my friends.

"In this parable," writes David Lose, "Jesus promises to be always with and for those who are in greatest need. Which means that if we want to experience God's presence fully, deeply, and truly, we will look for God in the need of those around us and, indeed, in our own need as well. This is not, I realize, what we *expect* of God. We typically think of God in ultimate terms – all knowing, all-powerful, all-just, and so on. And that makes a certain sense, as we are talking about the creator of the cosmos and author of all life. But that's not where Jesus invites us to meet, or be met by, God. [Christ empties himself and takes human form, being obedient even unto death on the cross (Phil. 2:7-8)]; and this act of condescension takes us by surprise, upsetting our expectations and disrupting our plans.

"But maybe it shouldn't [surprise us]," continues Dr. Lose. "After all, God didn't come to *reign over* humanity at Athens or Rome or any of the other major cities where one would expect God to arrive, but rather – *surprise!* – God came to *identify with* us by being born in lowly Bethlehem in the form of a vulnerable infant. And God didn't come to conquer the world with military or political might, but instead – *surprise!* – in the scandal, shame, and pain of the cross. So also God *continues* to come where we least expect God to be: in the plight of the homeless, on the side of the poor, in the face of the needy, and in the company of the imprisoned.

"And that's not all. If we are willing to suspend our expectations and *live into* the surprising reality of the God we know in Christ, then we are invited to meet God not in some distant eternal life or other-worldly reality but here and now, in the concrete and real need of our neighbors, just as *they* are invited to meet and be blessed by God as they tend to *our* needs as well. The God we know in Jesus is

revealed, that is, not in power but in vulnerability, not in might but brokenness, and not in judgment but in mercy.

“I know that this last one – about coming in mercy rather than judgment – may be, at least in this parable, the one that feels most like a stretch. After all, the whole parable seems to reach its climax when the Son of Man who comes in glory dismisses the unrighteous to eternal fire. But Jesus shares this parable on his way to the cross. Indeed, these are his last words before the beginning of his passion, an account that begins in *the very next verse* with these words: “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’”

“Which may mean that the Son of Man’s ‘coming in glory’ does not anticipate some final judgment at the end of time but rather describes the unexpected revelation that the Son of Man and Son of God is revealed – as the centurion who crucified him confesses – most clearly in the cross. [John’s Gospel most clearly presents Jesus reigning in glory and divine love from the cross.] Perhaps Jesus says in this parable what he has been saying all along through his teaching and actions and what he *will soon* say in and through his very body: that God loves us and all the world so much that God has decided to identify with us fully and completely. [Incarnation!] And so we recognize God most easily in the face of our neighbor, meet God in the acts of mercy and service we offer and are offered to us, and live in the blessing of God as we seek to serve as Christ served.” (David Lose, “...in the Meantime”)

I think this is what Richard Rohr means when he says, “The Incarnation is already redemption.” And we enter next Sunday into the Season of Incarnation.

Fr. Thomas Keating writes: “Divine love is triumphing over the apparent victory of worldliness, violence, and sin. Anyone who accepts that vision is reigning with Christ in the kingdom right now. To paraphrase Jesus’ words to the good thief, ‘You are in paradise right now even amidst your sufferings.’ Thus, as soon as we open ourselves to divine love, our sins are forgiven... We are instantly placed, like the good thief, in the reign of divine love. Thus, as the value systems of this world are reversed and selfishness is crucified in the body of Christ, divine love is poured out over the human family and made available to everyone who consents. The reign of Christ the King is not a reign of power but of compassion. He invites us to participate [in that reign].” (Thomas Keating, *Daily Reader*, Nov. 19)

“And this seems to me,” David Lose remarks, “like surprisingly good news: that God is with us, here and now, revealed in the fellowship of broken people we call church, made manifest in the ordinary elements of bread and wine, and available to us in the seemingly small gestures of mercy we offer and are offered each and every day. It may not be where we expect God to show up, but it is just where we **need** God to be.” (*ibid.*)

As you have done for the least of my children, so you have done for me.

Frederick Buechner writes, “Just as Jesus appeared at his birth as a helpless child that the world was free to care for or destroy, so now he appears in his resurrection as the pauper, the prisoner, the stranger: appears in every form of human need that the world is free to serve or to ignore.” Jesus appears in every form of human need that the world is free to serve or to ignore. (from Buechner’s book, “The Faces of Jesus”)

Human life is so fragile and vulnerable! And the miracle is that God chose to heal us not from without, but from within. God has taken humanity into God’s own self, and we are free to care for that divinely-occupied humanity or destroy it. But make no mistake: It is from the this utterly vulnerable place that Christ reigns.

AMEN