

Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

We seem to have come to that time of year when we celebrate one thing after another in quick succession. Three Sundays ago we celebrated All Saints Day. Last Thursday we celebrated Thanksgiving. Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in Pentecost. It is the day that we set aside to celebrate Jesus having come into all his glory. It is the Sunday set aside to publicly and officially acknowledge Jesus as King. Next Sunday, we will mark the first Sunday of Advent. The four Sundays in Advent and are each devoted to a time of anticipation and waiting for Jesus' entry into the world as a newborn on Christmas Day. It's a lot to pack into just a few short weeks and not get spiritually whiplashed by going back and forth.

But today we celebrate Jesus Christ as King. The description of him as he comes into his glory makes us sit up and take notice. Matthew tells us that Jesus will sit on the throne of his glory and all the angels will be with him. We can just imagine that His robe will be dazzling white. He will radiate a light that makes the sun seem pale. His light will be reflected off the iridescent wings of the angels and in breathtaking blue and silver and gold. It will be a perfectly amazing site ... one that will surely take our breath away. All the nations of the world will be gathered before him ... not just the children of Israel, not just the Christians born-again and otherwise, not those of other faiths who have other names for God and perhaps no name for Jesus, but ALL the nations of the world will be gathered before him. Just picture that ... as far as the eye can see... more people than any of us have ever seen in one place.

It will be the Day of Judgement. The day when each person will be judged on their holiness. Now all of the hearers of Jesus' words and Matthew's recounting of the story grew up knowing the Book of Leviticus and what it says about holiness. They believed that holiness was about some kind of spiritual purity ... about not breaking any of the rules ... about being pious and reverent and knowing all the proper ways to worship God. Some people today still believe that's what God meant when he said to the people of Israel: "I am holy and you will be holy also." But this parable that Jesus tells about holiness has little to do with spiritual purity or being liturgically correct.

On this Day of Judgement, when all eyes are on Jesus on his magnificent throne, he begins the task of dividing the people who have lined up before him one by one. The judgement will begin. This is the time when each of us will be held accountable for how we spent our lives ... what we

did and what we didn't do. Jesus will separate them the way the shepherd separates the sheep and the goats who graze together and roam together all day long, but at night go to their separate shelters. The sheep are going to go on Jesus' right hand side and the goats will go on his left. It's an interesting thing about sheep and goats. Once the sheep has been sheared, it looks very much like a goat. It's hard to tell at a distance which is which, but the shepherd knows because he knows each one of them. And Jesus knows each one of us ... better than we know ourselves. You see, this passage about judgement in Matthew is not about what we believe, it's about how we behave. It's not the intellectual exercise of determining exactly who Jesus is and how. It is about an emotional and spiritual exercise of the heart ... the compassion we feel and then act upon. It's not our creeds that are important here, but our deeds. Matthew is very clear about that.

Jesus says to the sheep and the goats: I was hungry and you fed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes. I was in jail and you went to visit me. I was sick and you took care of me. The sheep and the goats have at least one thing in common. Both of them seem surprised by what Jesus is saying. Both of them want to know, "When did we see you naked and clothe you or when did we see you hungry and give you something to eat?" Neither one of them made the connection between what they did or what they didn't do and how that figured into the way Jesus was dividing them. Neither the sheep nor the goats saw Jesus in a perilous condition and reached out to him. If they had known it was him, they most certainly would have done something to help. The interesting thing is that the sheep reached out anyway because they had compassion on another human being who was suffering. They didn't know it was Jesus, they simply acted out of their compassion. They acted from a place of love in their hearts because they knew something about the magnificent love of God for them. They didn't do it to get in good with God or because they wanted God to think highly of them. They didn't do it to try to be holy. They did it because another's suffering touched their hearts and inspired them to act. The goats also didn't know it was Jesus, but rather than reaching out to another suffering human, they turned their backs. They not only didn't see Jesus, they didn't see the person suffering either because if they had they might have felt compelled to do something about it. Better not to see at all. Better just to walk by or to even look past the suffering soul or even worse ... right through him.

Jesus talks to us about good trees bearing good fruit. They can't help it. The fruit is part of the tree. The fruit reflects the quality of the tree. Bad trees can't bear good fruit; they bear bad fruit because the fruit is part of the tree. Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is a bit like a bad tree trying to bear good fruit. God sees into our hearts and knows how and when we are motivated. Are we doing something out of honest compassion or because we believe it to be the right thing to do OR are we doing it because we know we are supposed to do it or because we are fearful about what will happen to us if we don't?

I had a couple of buddies in seminary who volunteered to work at one of the local churches providing a hypothermia shelter during the winter months. Before they did their volunteer work, they decided that they wanted to find out what it would be like to be a homeless person, so they set about on a 24 hour adventure to see for themselves. They did some very good preparation in advance. They stopped taking showers about three or four days before they went out and they stopped shaving. They wore the same clothes 24 hours a day for a whole week. By the end of the week, they looked....and smelled....pretty authentic. With less than \$5.00 each in their pockets, they headed on foot into DC. The stories they tell about their 24 hours as homeless men are both riotously funny and also very poignant. They weren't very good at panhandling and they couldn't find anyone who could or would tell them where they could get some food. When the sun went down and they got pretty cold, they managed to get a couple of beds at a local shelter that took them in for the night. Everyone else there was in the same condition they were ... unkempt and unpresentable. They slept only a few hours and as soon as it was daylight they left to begin another day walking the streets. One of the things they began to notice that next day was that no one would make eye contact with them. People seemed to look through them or past them as if they weren't there. They felt invisible. They began to realize what it meant to be truly marginalized. Both explained what an eye-opening experience it was for them. Neither of them had ever been in a situation before where people routinely simply did not 'see' them.

This is the one passage in all of Holy Scripture that will make me squirm in my seat every time. When I hear these words from Matthew, I stand convicted. I wish I could figure out how to explain this away. I wish I could make it a softer and more conciliatory message. I look at Jesus' description of the sheep and the goats and I know I'm a goat. I don't like being scammed by someone trying to get a few dollars from me and offering nothing in return. I don't like being 'played' by a con artist. I get annoyed by those folks who stand in traffic with cardboard signs saying "Homeless" or the heartbreaker "Hungry." They walk between the cars and I look away. I'm annoyed that they have interrupted my otherwise busy and perhaps seemingly productive day with their shameless pleas for help and their pokes to my guilty conscience for not helping them. There's something within me that keeps tugging at me and saying that looking away is not what I should be doing, so this story haunts me. The most haunting thing about it for me is not that I will endure eternal punishment or be banished. As awful as that is, it's not what gives me pause.

What haunts me most about this story is that this destitute person who just walked past me was Jesus Christ himself... and I didn't even see look.

AMEN.

Based on a sermon by Jim Somerville, Pastor of First Baptist Church, Richmond