

Sheep & Goats

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This feast is relatively new in the Church calendar. It has also been moved around between dates before settling on the last Sunday after Pentecost. It seems an appropriate time as Christ the King focuses on the Second Coming of Christ and the day of Judgement. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent we have scriptures not pointing to Christmas but to the end of days and what leads up to the Second Coming. That is, we start the New Year of the Church looking to the long awaited Second Coming and we end the year with a description of the Second Coming.

In the Hebrew Scriptures this day was called the Day of the Lord. It was the time when God would return to earth and set things right. The wicked would be vanquished, the righteous would be elevated, and a new Jerusalem would come down from heaven and become the seat of the Lord and the center of the world. Initially it was a day to anticipate. Thus we will begin our new year next week with predictions of this long expected day.

Coming back to Christ the King, some people are uncomfortable with king language. This is partly because the kings we have in our age are mostly ceremonial officers without any power, while kings in the past were often cruel. Some call this Sunday the Reign of Christ. It is still monarchical language, but without the masculine inference. There are others who refer to this day as the Kin-dom of Christ. That bugs me on several levels. First, Kin-dom is not a word. Second, and more importantly, it denies the authority of God and Christ. If we are all just kin with Christ and God, we have made ourselves equal to God and deny the creative, redeeming and sustaining power of the deity.

This soft language also reminds me of the movie “Dogma” which features the character call the Buddy Christ. He is a sort of surfer dude who is a back slapping glad handing third rate motivational speaker. He is someone you may want to have a beer with, but is hardly someone to worship, praise, love or emulate. He is not a miracle worker, preacher or teacher.

We can recognize that kingship can be a problem for some but there is more to grapple with in this passage from Matthew’s Gospel. Usually I make a point of telling you that Jesus is speaking in parables and not allegories, but in this case it is an allegory. Sheep are not inherently righteous and goats are not inherently wicked. Jesus is using the image of a shepherd, one of his favorite images, to make a point about the Day of Judgement.

In Jesus’ time shepherds often herded mixed groups of critters. But when it came time to put them in a pen at night they needed to separate the sheep and goats. The goats needed extra care because they do not have the wool of sheep to keep them warm. They needed a hut or enclosure where they could huddle up to keep warm, while the sheep could be in an open pen and be just fine. Jesus is using this familiar image to explain how the righteous and unrighteous will be separated in the end times.

The remainder of this passage from Matthew 25 is convicting. It is less about who Jesus is than what Jesus expects of his followers. However, it is important not to look at this as a prescription for salvation. Some may think to themselves, “Oh, this is all I have to do. Make sure I work at the food bank, get a pen-pal in jail, give away my old clothing, and otherwise be a nice person, and I am guaranteed a place in heaven. I am golden.” That is not what Jesus is saying at all. Rather there is an important

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The Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Holy Eucharist 8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.
November 26, 2023

aspect that we may have missed. Something that the righteous and the cursed don't realize. It is that they were not aware.

The righteous were not aware that they were serving Christ and the cursed were not aware that they were not serving Christ. Righteousness is more than doing good works. It is more than taking time to help, giving away stuff, providing food, water or shelter to someone in need. It is serving the Christ in the another person that is what is the crucial element.

“Elaine Pagels says Jesus’ words are the basis for a radical new social structure based on the God-given dignity and value of every human being.” Human beings are not to be abused or tortured. Not because all people are fine, but because Jesus is with them, even the bad ones. Jesus is saying that “what you do to prisoners you are doing to me.” What you do to the hungry and thirsty you are doing to me. What you do to the poor, ill clothed, ill housed, unhoused, the sick, and the stranger you have done to me.

It is radical not because it involves caring for those in need, most religions call for the care of the poor, hungry, and the outsider. What is radical is that we are called by Jesus to see Christ in them. The same Christ that we see in those we love. The same Christ that we hope others see in us. It is not a Christlikeness that we have earned by our good deeds or righteous life. It is a Christlikeness that is put in us from the moment of our birth. For some the Christ in them shines forth like a polished diamond from day one. For most of us the diamond is in the rough and needs cutting and polishing over a lifetime. For others the diamond gets hidden under pain, abuse, hardheartedness, sadness, depression, and difficult circumstances. Regardless, the Christ is still there and Jesus calls us to look for and serve it in everyone.

We may not recognize that in the other but we can look for it. When we start looking for it we just might see it. It is like anything. We will see what we look for, and we will miss something when we are focused elsewhere. The best way to see the Christ in others is to serve them. When we serve others our position is not superior or inferior. We are not looking down, but looking at and into the other person.

When we do this we become more human in our eyes and hearts. They are just another with whom we have a chance to relate to and love. As we do this the Christ in us recognizes the Christ in them. We join in the service to the one Christ whose reign is eternal in our hearts and in the world and in all of creation. We begin to recognize the Christ in others and access it in ourselves. So that unlike the sheep and goats who do not know when they have served or ignored Christ we begin to get the inkling of it. We become aware and alive to the Christ in the world. We joyfully serve Christ and are led to the heavenly country of his new kingdom in this world and in the next.