

“Only Kindness Matters”

We have a lot of ground to cover today. It is the last Sunday of the Church year or Christ the King Sunday and we have demanding Gospel lesson to unpack. To paraphrase Bette Davis in “All about Eve” “Fasten your seatbelts. It’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

How many have been to England? When traveling around England you are likely to see the letters ER on government buildings, mailboxes and uniforms. ER stands for Elizabeth Regina. These are the initials of the monarch. Take a look at the cover of your bulletin. In the upper left hand corner, you see four letters--INRI. These initials remind us of the sign that Pontius Pilate put above Jesus’ head when he was crucified. They stand for the Latin words *Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum* in English Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. This is just one example of initials that are used to remind us of Jesus.

As I noted earlier, today we mark as Christ the King Sunday. While Pontius Pilate meant for those words to mock Jesus, we accept that Jesus is not only the King of the Jews but of all creation. Indeed, according to the Gospel of John “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”¹ This last Sunday of the Church year we are reminded that we are to acknowledge Jesus as King of the universe, King of the world and King of our hearts; this brings us to today’s Gospel reading.

This passage from Matthew shows Jesus talking about the eschaton or end of time. As the Son of Man/Jesus sits on a throne, the nations gather before him. We may read this as the entire world, but in the Bible “the nations” usually means people who are not Jews, i.e. Gentiles. If that is the case, the implication is that the Jews are exempt from judgment. It is ironic given that Christians through the centuries have persecuted Jews for being evil and less than human.

As the Son of Man/King/Jesus sits on the throne in judgement of the nations he divides the people into sheep and goats. The sheep are the ones who followed Jesus as their shepherd and the goats are the defiant ones who turned away from Jesus. Naturally the sheep are invited into the Kingdom of Heaven with Jesus saying, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”² In contrast, the goats are sent to punishment as Jesus says, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”³ That is pretty scary stuff.

Jesus makes it clear what separates the sheep from the goats. It is not belief in Jesus or even God. It is not adhering to a creed. It is not following orthodox theology. It is not belief in the virgin birth, the inerrancy of the Bible, the literal nature of the biblical accounts, especially Jesus’ miracles, the creation account in Genesis and the bodily resurrection and physical return of Christ. It is not about whether you read the Bible, say Grace at meals, pray before going to bed, or give to the church. It is not whether one is a Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Baptist, Greek orthodox or any of the

¹ John 1:3 NRSV

² Matthew 25:34 NRSV

³ Matthew 25:41 NRSV

Gene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

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numerous nondenominational churches. Indeed, he does not say anything about belonging to a church at all.

Jesus says that what separates the followers of Jesus from those who refuse to follow is, "...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."⁴

What is so amazing is that those who did these things are not aware that they did them. Those who did not do these things are not aware that they did not. That is so like us humans. We are so fixated on what we decide is important, that we miss what God has been trying to teach us all along.

Jesus states that when all is said and done, the only thing that matters is that we take care of each other. That is why the first people to follow Jesus were called the People of the Way.⁵ The first followers did as Jesus did and lived in groups that cared for each other as well as those outside the group. When the church is at its best that is what we do. When we gather food for the hungry, help struggling people with their utility bills, rent and medicine, give shoes and clothes to those who do not have them, care for the sick, and, probably hardest of all, visit those who are in prison.

There was a song back in the 1990s called "Hands" by the singer songwriter Jewel Kitcher. It is a song about the singer learning what is important in life. She discovers many aspects and then realizes:

*In the end only kindness matters
In the end only kindness matters*

She ends with a prayerful chant that echoes the words of St. Teresa of Avila⁶

*We are God's eyes, God's hands, God's mind
We are God's eyes, God's hands, God's heart*

Jesus, The King of Kings, and Lord of Lords tells us that it is not power, money, belief or any other human system that gets us close to God. It is kindness to one another, loving your neighbor as yourself. That is what God wants of us.

As for separating the goats from the sheep, I believe that if we are honest with ourselves we know that each of us has a bit of the goat and a bit of the sheep in us. We are called to keep working to build up that part of us that follows Jesus and to set aside the selfish part that is the goat. Because, dear friends, in the end, only kindness matters; kindness to one another and every single one of God's children in this world—our neighbors, our friends and even our enemies.

⁴ Matthew 25:35-36

⁵ Acts 9:2

⁶ "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours."