

Christ the King - Matthew 25:31-46 Year A

As the worshipers arrived on a late November morning at St. Joseph's Church in this little western town, they were met by a rather disturbing sight.

An apparently homeless beggar sat on the front steps of the church, wearing a tattered coat, a wool cap pulled down over his eyes, and clutching a bottle in fingerless gloves. They had never seen anything quite like this in this little town.

Most worshipers simply walked around the man, or stepped over him, as he sat there. Some muttered words of disapproval, and others suggested that the man move to another doorway before the Sunday School children arrived.

One member told the man, in no uncertain terms, that the Salvation Army was a more appropriate place to sleep it off. At one point, a kind woman brought the man a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee, but not one person asked the man to come in out of the cold, and certainly nobody invited him in to join them in worship.

Imagine, then, the people's surprise during the entrance hymn, when their homeless friend made his way into the pulpit, took off his cap, and the people recognized that it was their pastor!

The pastor began his remarks that morning by saying, "I didn't do this to embarrass you or to poke you in the eye. I did it to remind us that this is a person that Jesus loves, and he has called us to love him, too."

In the gospel lesson today, Jesus is telling his disciples about the last days. At that time, Jesus says, the King will gather all the nations around the throne, and he will say to the sheep on his right; “When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me in. When I was sick and imprisoned, you cared for me.”

And the people on the right were surprised; “Lord, when?” they asked. “When did we feed you, or give you drink, or clothe you, or welcome you?” And Jesus said “Whenever you did it to one of the least ones, you did it for me.”

Then, Jesus said, the King will turn to the goats on his left and he will say to them, “And when I was hungry, you did NOT feed me, and when I was thirsty, you gave me nothing to drink. When I was naked, and a stranger, and sick, and imprisoned, you never reached out to me.”

And the people on the left were equally surprised, “Lord, when? When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or a stranger, or sick, or imprisoned, and did not help you?” And the King answered “When you failed to help the least of my people, you failed to help me.”

This teaching of Jesus is so very different from all His other teaching in the Gospel of Matthew. Because in the previous chapters, Jesus is telling parables. But in this text, Jesus is looking into the future, explaining in graphic detail, what sort of judgment day awaits every one of us.

It’s not a parable. It’s not a fairy tale. It is truth, coming right out of the mouth of Jesus. It tells us that God does, in fact, watch the way we live our lives, and the way we live matters.

And Jesus plainly says that one day, each of us will stand in line as the King points the way to eternity. Some will be directed to the right, and they will spend forever in the Kingdom of God. But others will be directed to the left, and eternity, for them, will be spent in hell.

Now, I know what you are thinking. You have heard the sermons on grace; you have heard God described as a loving and merciful King, ready to forgive our every sin. And now, you are wondering “Okay, Pastor, which way is it?”

Is God going to grant us grace, or is he going to hold our sins against us? Do we have to earn our way into the Kingdom, or will it be given to us as a gift?”

And this story about the sheep and the goats troubles you, because, all along, you thought you were a sheep. But what if you’re a goat? It troubles you, because the stakes are high, and eternity lasts forever.

Everything you have heard about God’s grace is true. He does, indeed, stand ready to forgive every sin and every act of disobedience. But God also has expectations of how His people are to live their lives. The Saints will be generous. The Saints will be kind. The Saints will be filled with compassion. It’s what the Saints do.

Giving and doing does not make us Saints. Giving and doing proves that we are Saints. Generosity and kindness and compassion are part of the DNA of a Christian. And once we recognize that God has claimed us as sons and daughters of the King, and once we realize that we will inherit everything the King has promised, then things in this world diminish in their value.

So now, the question that stands before us is this: What does our lifestyle say about us? According to Jesus' words on this Christ the King Sunday, it seems to say this: We will recognize the sheep and the goats by the way they live their lives.

You see, sheep graciously share what they have, paying particular attention to those who are in desperate need. Goats want to keep all they have to themselves. Sheep see others in distress, and they are moved to compassion. But goats see others in distress and they are moved to ignore them.

In short, when goats see an apparently homeless man, sitting on the steps of a church, they see a homeless man. When sheep see an apparently homeless man, sitting on the steps of a church, they see Jesus.

What do you see?