

We arrive at Christ the King Sunday without recognizing we have been preparing for this all year long, in preparation for this affirmation all our lives! The Season of Advent provides weeks to wrestle with the Incarnation: God choosing to set aside Divinity, to become Mortal as humble as a baby. Then we have weeks to reflect on this miracle! There are five weeks of Lent to build up to the Death and Resurrection of the Messiah. Now as we bask in the afterglow of Thanksgiving, the Parade, Football Games, Family, Friends and all we have in this life to be thankful for; Spiritually, we are guided to Christ as The King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In these United States, a Divine Monarchy is about as different as we can envision, and a Monarch, whom we acknowledge not simply as "LONG LIVE THE KING" until that Monarch dies or is dethroned and the next generation takes over; NO for Eternity!

In explanation for us, The Prophet Ezekiel identifies GOD with the lowliest and most ancient of vocations, GOD is our Shepherd. Moses and David had each been shepherds, as well as Jacob's bride Rachel, and Zipporah, and the Woman in the Song of Solomon. AND we know at the Start of the year, we will send Pastor Diane: Out to Pasture. According to Ezekiel, GOD is a different kind of Shepherd. Just as with Psalm 23, GOD is the Shepherd who seeks and saves the LOST, who watches over the sheep, protecting them from lions, bears and wolves, leading us to green pastures and spring waters; YET also shepherding between sheep, because some of us do but horns with others, some sheep muddy the waters after having our fill so that those who come after have polluted waters.

At the end of verse 16, our 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph there is a curiosity, GOD binds up the injured and weak; DESTROYING the fattened and strong by feeding them with justice? Justice is not only protecting the weak and wounded; JUSTICE also changes the powerful, saving these from being bullies. In EZEKIEL we have foreshadowing of Matthew 25, where Jesus judges between Sheep and Sheep. This was routine at the end of every day! All day long the sheep and goats would graze and water side by side, but at dusk, as temperatures drop, Sheep could remain outdoors with their woolly coats, while Goats with a flat coat of hair needed to be separated and taken indoors where there were fires to keep warm.

Before we get into the meat of this morning's witness, we need to accept that in BIBLE STUDY, particularly with PARABLES, there is an intended meaning, which jars and does not easily fit when taken out of context. Growing up, I had elder brothers and teachers were always making comparisons, "Your brother was a football player... You look just like your brother, except he excelled at Chemistry, why don't you?" We have our lifetimes, to draw lines of connection and development between our life experiences. We cannot make every facet of Church teaching and Christian Theology Neatly fit together, especially in a Parable intended to demonstrate A SINGULAR POINT.

There is a subtle but profound nuance at the beginning of Jesus' description in Matthew 25. Out of the lips of Jesus: No longer is the sole focus of teaching and of judgement THE NATION OF ISRAEL, instead ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE GATHERED before the Son of Man in His Glory. There is no distinction between being Jewish by Blood, or Christian by Theology, no distinction between Muslim and Jew and Christian and Atheist. No longer Antisemitism or Islamophobia, Fear of China, Russia or America. The conditions for SALVATION, for Recognition by GOD as Good/ Evil is no longer Religion or Theological Beliefs but ACTION!

There are significant problems taking this vision out of context, without the teachings of Paul, without the Reformation's emphasis on the GRACE of GOD over Works Righteousness, without the accountability of Christian Community! Being told by Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel to Jesus' Disciples, what this represents is a Vision of the Final Days when as Christians we cannot fall back on the assurance that I was once BAPTIZED or I was FORGIVEN, I was a Member of the Presbyterian Church, instead that our Salvation as Christians also demands the ways we have lived, ministering to others or not doing so.

For Jesus, we Today, represent ALL THE NATIONS GATHERED before the Son of Man in Glory, for American Christians were never anticipated 2000 years ago among Jews in the Grecco-Roman Empire, where you were either Jew or Gentile.

As a Cradle Christian, a third-generation Presbyterian, I always took great comfort in this passage from Matthew. In hindsight, I guess because as Christians in addition to trusting the GRACE of GOD, believing the CREEDS,... we Said GRACE at every dinner, went on Mission Trips, Donating Clothing, Fed the Hungry, Visited people in Prison and facilities, tried to live up to making a difference in the world. At one point, I was in a Bible Study like the one he have here on Mondays, but with folk from churches in the community. Reading this Chapter, a friend who had been part of a very conservative Pentecostal congregation tearfully described "I have lived my life in FEAR & DREAD because of this passage! I have always known I was a Goat, and in the end I would be found out!"

While this is Matthew's Vision of the Last judgement, the only Vision of the Last Judgement in any Gospel, origin behind Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, it had never occurred to me that this was about JUDGEMENT, it was Confirmation of who and what we already take for granted we are called to do in life.

"WHAT EVER YOU DO FOR THE LEAST OF THESE – The sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned – YOU DO FOR ME," said Jesus. In these familiar words of Jesus are 3 profoundly important ideas.

- 1) FIRST is a statement about GOD. The God of Jesus in the Bible, is not a remote Supreme Being on a throne up there, above the clouds in the remote reaches of space. Jesus said "GOD IS HERE" in the messiness and ambiguities and conflicts of life. GOD IS HERE especially in your neighbor, the one who needs you. If you want to see the FACE of GOD, look in the face of one of the least of these, the most vulnerable, one who is the most different from you.
- 2) The second is a radical statement about the practice of religion. Terrible atrocities have been and are being perpetuated by people shouting "GOD IS GREAT!" Religious officials hiding abuses, while denying the Sacraments to those with whom they disagree. There is not a single word here about theology, creeds, or orthodoxy or politics. There is only one Criterion, and that is whether you looked into the face of the needy and saw Jesus there, whether you gave yourself away, in love, in his name.
- 3) The 3<sup>rd</sup> and most important thing, is not Corporate, Social, Political or Economic, or even Religious, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Radical Idea here from Jesus is Personal: GOD WANTS YOU, each and every one of us! GOD wants a new Creation modeled on each of us having the love of JESUS. To recapture the language of the Old Tent Revival Meetings: GOD WANTS TO SAVE OUR SOULS! GOD desires to redeem us with LIFE, true, deep, authentic, HUMAN LIFE as Jesus lived for others. GOD wants to save us by having us CARE, seeing in the eyes and souls of others who are in need. GOD wants to Save Us from obsession about ourselves and our possessions, our needs and desires, to forget ourselves and live our lives in concern for others.

That is GOD's favorite project: Teaching You and Me the Fundamental Leson, the Secret, the Truth: THAT TO LOVE IS TO LIVE.