Last Sunday After Pentecost

Christ the King

November 22, 2020

St. James Episcopal, Louisa

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**“What is it that you have done?”**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14

Today we come to the end of the Christian year. Today is Christ the King Sunday and concludes this Christian year. It is a fitting resolution to the end of our church year - a recognition and culmination that ultimately, “Christ is King.” Next Sunday we begin the new Christian year as we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. Following the Christian year and marking our days liturgically is one gift that the Episcopal Church has to offer. Week by week we read, study, and meditate upon the same passages that millions of other Christians will be reading, studying, and meditating upon. We keep asking the question, “What does it mean to be Christ’s presence on this day, in this place and time in history?” as we follow the liturgical calendar. It helps keep us focused and helps us to form our days and thinking. Today is important because in a world that is often ruled by other entities it reminds us that ultimately Christ is King and is on His throne. We are leaving “ordinary time” marked by green, and entering a special season of Advent beginning next Sunday, which will be marked by Violet or Blue. These visible, tangible things help us focus and discipline our minds.

Today’s Gospel reading is the final parable in Matthew.

Jesus began his series of parables with the Parable of the Sower and the different soils that the seed falls on. It is a vivid picture of the challenges that faith must overcome. It uses the imagery of a growing crop to illustrate the ways that the Gospel takes root in a person’s life. It carries that ray of hope that some seed produces a bountiful harvest. This final parable is another agricultural story, but instead of a crop growing, it is a story of a shepherd and his flock. It is a sorting pen kind of story. The shepherd stands at a gate and sorts the flock into two different pens. The sheep are sorted off to the pen on the right, the goats are sorted to the left pen. That is the base story that Jesus begins with. Shepherds understood the image. But Jesus moves beyond the base story, and you sense quickly that Jesus is talking about more than sheep and goats. The scene changes quickly. The sheep pen is left behind and now it is people being sorted. Today is Christ the King Sunday and this parable has Jesus sitting on the throne sorting people left and right.

 Those of you who have read and listened to Jesus’ parables for years have probably already figured out that Jesus’ stories aren’t intended to make you comfortable. Most of the time, if Jesus’ story makes you feel warm and cuddly, you’ve probably missed the point. His stories have an edge to them, and even after 2000 years of readers trying to find a way to domesticate them, his stories are as untamed as any wild animal. In today’s story, once you get past the imagery of the shepherd sorting sheep from goats, we get swept into a judgment scene. Those on the right are welcomed into the Kingdom. The Judge rationalizes the judgment. “I was hungry, and you fed me. I was in prison and you visited me. I needed clothes and you clothed me.” “When did that happen?” they asked, “I don’t remember that?”

“Whenever you did it unto one of the least of these, you did it for me.”

Now as a child, I don’t remember this story being told. It may have been, but I don’t remember it. I doubt that it was told very often, because it runs counter to the simple salvation messages I heard as a child. You may have heard those messages too. Those who were raised in another faith tradition would be familiar. Salvation is about trusting Jesus for salvation and inviting him into your heart. Once you do that, you’re in. Once saved, always saved. When you stand before God and God asks, “Why should I let you into my heaven? You answer, because I let Jesus into my heart.” Does that sound familiar?

 It is simple, concise, easy to understand.

The problem is that Jesus’ stories don’t lend themselves to simple answers. They complicate our attempts to summarize the Gospel message in simple terms. While we must teach Biblical truths in ways that can be understood; it is a mistake to think that we can ever completely understand or communicate the rich depth of its message. The passage today stands side by side with those biblical passages that talk about confessing Jesus as Lord and being saved. But in this passage, the final judgment focuses on how we have treated those who are in need.

Jesus has a soft spot for those who are the least of these, the people who get overlooked. The judgment for those on the left and those on the right is the same. The question for both was the same, ***“What did you do when you saw people in need?”***

It might be that one of the reasons this passage makes us uncomfortable is that we live in one of the wealthiest countries on earth. While the United States makes up only 4.25% of the earth’s population, we control 30% of its wealth. The number used to be higher, but other countries aren’t that far behind anymore. When measured collectively, Asia is now boasting a higher total.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The discrepancy between the rich and poor is getting substantially greater. The world’s 500 wealthiest people saw their fortunes grow by an incredible 1.2T last year alone. To put that in perspective, that’s more than the total wealth for all of Africa. [[2]](#footnote-3)

I wonder if people who have nothing feel as uncomfortable with this story as I do? We are blessed with resources and can do something about people who are in need. We have been asked as a church family to help provide food for 10 families in Louisa for Thanksgiving. We are also helping with Angel Tree again this year to help provide Christmas gifts for local families who are in need. So this may be an appropriate time for us to be reminded of this parable.

In this story, both those on the right and those on the left, were surprised when they discovered that there was a connection between how they had treated those in need, and how they treated the king on the throne. To help the least was in fact helping the king. To avoid helping the least of these was failing to help the king. Those on the right seem surprised that they had helped the king, that wasn’t their intention in feeding the hungry; someone was hungry and it was their natural response.

Our love and devotion to God gets played out, not by what we say, but by what we do. And sometimes, it is in the caring for the hurting that we discover our inheritance, the kingdom God has prepared for us since the creation of the world. We discover the Kingdom, not as some distant future event, but as a present manifestation of God’s work and mystery.

Our own Rev. John Ogden von Hemert, (1985-1996) who served as our first full-time vicar, had a vision for helping those in Louisa county who were hungry and in need and led in the formation of the Louisa County Resource Council. St. James has a legacy of being on the forefront of helping those in need in this area.

It is a legacy to continue and to build on because serving others in need is not about the compassion we feel, nor is it about feeling satisfaction over helping someone in need.

It is putting into practice the values and commands we have received from the Lord. As Christians and as a congregation, we strive to offer Christian concern and ministry to those in need. We participate in God’s Kingdom, here and now. Let us not forget those values and commands.

Rev. John Ogden von Hemert led the community in outreach in his day. He did it because he understood that as a Christian, our nature has been changed, we are moving from the self-centeredness that is part and parcel with being human, and moving toward the concern for others that our Master demonstrated. We as a parish, have a legacy to live in too.

We love and serve because He first loved us. We feed the hungry. We visit the sick and provide comfort to the bereaved. All because we have caught the vision of the difference a Christian congregation can make in its community. I commend you for your ministry to our community. Louisa County and the Kingdom of God are enriched by our ministry.

St. James has gone through a period of losing some members. It has been grievous and will continue to be so for a little while for loss requires time to heal. But let us not lose sight of who we are and where we came from and why we exist.

The Bible's central message is not about believing in God so you go too Heaven when you die.

In fact, in Matthew, belief in and of itself is not sufficient for disciples.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus laments that many people will call him Lord, but only those who act upon his teachings can be his true followers.

 And in the so-called Great Commission, coming at the end of this gospel, Jesus doesn't say to form disciples who believe that he is the Messiah; he says, teach them to observe the teachings I have commanded of you.

So, if you are thinking the main question that Christianity concerns is “Am I going to Heaven? Will I be saved? Am I a sheep or a goat?” Matthew suggests that you have missed the point.

Maybe the question rightly asked is not what happens at the end of things, but more like what am I supposed to be doing right now? What does Jesus want me to do? To be? How will my life be different since Christ is King?

The conflict over who is lord is acted out in our lives today.

Life in God's Kingdom is not about what you have or who you are, it's about what you do. It's not about what the world values, but what God values.

How are things going to end? What happens after we die? I don't know exactly and neither do you, but we do know the shape of the story: If Christ is King, we know Jesus waits at the end of that story, that He will see us, and know us, and that if we have done what He taught us, He will claim us as his own.

May God give us grace and courage as face the opportunities and challenges of this new day. Amen.

1. https://[howmuch.net](http://howmuch.net)/articles/distribution-worlds-wealth-2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://[howmuch.net](http://howmuch.net)/articles/distribution-worlds-wealth-2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)