

Sermon for the Feast Day of Christ the King  
November 22, 2020  
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my rock and my salvation. Amen.*

Today's gospel lesson is the last parable in Matthew's fifth discourse – the End Times discourse. Throughout Matthew's gospel runs an apocalyptic narrative – apocalyptic in the sense of the Greek word meaning to reveal. Matthew's audiences are Jewish Christian converts who have been scattered after the destruction of the Temple and who are being persecuted. Matthew writes to them about the end of the age that's soon to come. The last two Sundays' gospel lessons were parables of judgment – the wise and foolish bridesmaids and the teaching about the talents. Today's gospel lesson is an eschatological parable, an end times vision of Jesus, sitting on the judgment throne. In this final parable, the previous parables' allusions to judgment are made explicit.

Jesus, the Son of Man, reigns as Christ the King in heavenly splendor, surrounded by all the angels. Before him are all the nations of the world, whom he separates, as a shepherd does, sheep from the goats – sheep on the right hand, goats on the left. Those on the right had are granted salvation; those on the left are damned. Jesus bids the saved to enter into the kingdom prepared for them. Then he tells the righteous why they are the saved.

He proclaims to them: “for 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 cared for me, I was in prison and you visited me.” The righteous are surprised, not understanding the reasons for their salvation, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty, a stranger in need, naked, sick or imprisoned?” Jesus tells them, “just as you did to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

There are two remarkable things present in this exchange between Jesus and the saved. First, the righteous express surprise out of a holy ignorance, out of a true innocence, that their acts of kindness and mercy are rewarded. The saved did what they did without expecting reward or recognition. They did what they did

out of compassion, out of mercy, in response to human need, out of love. They did what they did without any expectation that these acts of loving kindness would be noticed, much less rewarded. These are those who Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

The second remarkable thing is that Jesus says, “*I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison.*” Jesus tells the saved that he was literally embodied, literally present in those they cared for. Though they didn’t recognize him in their ministries to the needy to whom they gave food, drink, welcome, clothing, healing, and comfort, they had touched the Body of Christ. In this parable, we are led to understand that in the Kingdom of God, Jesus dwells among those in desperate need. The righteous, who inherit the kingdom prepared for them since the beginning of the world, are those who serve selflessly those marginalized persons in whom the incarnate Jesus lives.

Jesus judges “all the nations”, so salvation is available to all who act out of compassion and with pure love toward those on the fringes of society. Salvation is given to those who see and touch the Body of Christ in whom is healing, mercy, and grace. There’s a lesson here that we should look outside our circles of comfort and privilege because Jesus is always and already outside our circumscribed, secure existences. We’re called not to stay comfortable, or to go inward, but to go into the world bearing the love of Christ. That move is always a move toward God.

John J. Collins comments, “When Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, nothing is said about belief or faith. What matters is how people acted, whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the imprisoned. Faith in the sense of belief is no guarantee how a person will act. Faith is commitment. Its value lies in the kinds of action and lifestyle to which it is committed.”

We are thus called to live out our faith in acts of compassion. Neighbors Table feeds the hungry among us and welcomes strangers. Russellville’s food banks share our abundance. The River Valley Christian Clinic heals the sick. Some among us oppose capital punishment in vigils at the governor’s mansion. Some among us have celebrated Holy Eucharist at Cummins Prison in the presence of mass executions. LGBT and disabled persons are welcomed into the All Saints’

community. There are those in the Episcopal Church who work for the reduction of drug sentences and the reform of cash bails. There are those who stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. There are those to leave caches of water in the Sonoran Desert for migrants. There are those who feed, clothe, and shelter detained migrants turned out onto the streets of El Paso. And on and on the list goes of those “serving the least of these who are members of [our] families.” *Amen.*