

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said to his disciples, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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 took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

REFLECTION 1:

WHAT SHEPHERDING REQUIRES

While today's feast is called The Solemnity of Christ the King, each reading employs images of shepherds and shepherding. Each offers insight into what shepherding means, not just in physical terms but also in terms of a worldview. The image of a shepherd was a metaphor for kingship in ancient Israel and throughout the Near East. Ezekiel (First Reading) who was the prophet of Jewish refugees in Babylonia depicts God as a shepherd gathering in the scattered sheep. God is a seeker after the strays, the injured and the unwell. He also knows how to shepherd the sleek and the strong. In this reading we also detect a reference to judgment between the sheep and goats.

Psalm 23 (Res. Ps.) represents shepherding as an act of accompaniment; God working within the community as its members bear each other up in evil times. The Psalmist describes God's role, showing how accompaniment becomes deliverance. For Matthew, the shepherd sorts out those who opt for the kingdom and those who opt out, the sheep and goats. Fritz Etchenberg in his woodcut, "The Christ of the Breadlines", depicts Jesus as the central figure in a line of homeless and hungry men and we ask today where we might stand? Jesus examines how people responded to the dispossessed during their lives. Those judged to be honorable and those judged to be dishonorable give the same response in the Gospel, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you or thirsty and gave you to drink...?" The honorable did the right thing, not because they saw Jesus, they admit as much. They simply saw and responded to people in need. Our tendency to blame poverty on the poor makes it hard for us to take this passage seriously.

When we profess Christian faith we profess that the dispossessed - the ones left out of the marketplace - the disposable ones - actually matter. The market may not have a place for their particular skills, but God finds them invaluable. According to Matthew, the closest we can come to a face-to-face encounter with Jesus is to be fully present to the poor and marginalised. The Last Judgment is about God shepherding us

into the finality of our choices. Once there, we may gain the capacity to accompany others and inherit the kingdom, having learnt it from the Dispossessed One. Today's Gospel calls us to love, share, and feed, welcome and clothe one another. When we do we will discover that Jesus is truly present in all our brothers and sisters.

REFLECTION 2:

A KING IN PARTNERSHIP

The big idea of the Old Testament is that the God of Ancient Israel is a God of relationship, ready and able to make commitments to a series of 'partners'. These partners in turn are empowered to make a difference in the world. This notion of God in relationship, a partner, stands in stark contrast where God and human beings are understood as isolated agents – God up there and we down here, mentality. God's first partner is Israel, the chosen people who were called by God to a relationship through Abraham and through Moses and the emancipated slaves in Egypt. God as the origin of all that exists is also in partnership with creation, as celebrated in the Psalms; 'The heavens tell the glory of God...the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'. (Psalm 24).

Israel also learned that God is a partner with each human being made in God's image and blessed to share in God's dominion over the Earth. This partnership is given beautiful expression in today's reading as Ezekiel (Ezek: 54) describes a shepherd's willingness to see to all the needs of his helpless sheep. Unlike today, shepherds in ancient times were true companions of their sheep, which they loved and tended and remained with at all times. To describe the care of God for each human being in this way, emphasises the hands-on qualities of our Shepherd, Pastor, King and Lord.

God's partnership with each human person became deeper when Jesus took on flesh and moved among us as a man. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, reminds us that our Partner Jesus, has died for us and has risen to glory. He is the first fruits from the dead and one day all who are partners with him will follow the path he has trod. God has also chosen to be a partner to all nations and this reality continues to challenge the human desire for exclusive love, our leanings towards being the favourites!

Furthermore, our Gospel for today (Matt 25: 31-46) reminds us in terms most clear that God has chosen to partner in a special way with the least ones among us. In the judgement scene, Jesus explains: 'Whatever you did for the least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'. Jesus insists that our respect for his partnership with the poor will be the criteria of our final judgement. We show our respect in simple ways – offering food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, welcome to strangers, care for the ill and imprisoned. In ministering to these least ones, we do so to Jesus himself. In the process he ministers to us by feeding our needs, healing our ills, calming our fears and encouraging our hope.

In such acts of kindness for the poor, our partnership with Jesus grows stronger and deeper. In the end this partnership will be the only thing that travels with us through the passage of death to everlasting life. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said that the biggest disease in the world today is not AIDS or cancer, but the feeling of being unwanted and uncared for. The greatest evil in our world, she said, is lack of love and the terrible indifference towards our neighbour.