Solemnity of Christ the King

S. Stephen’s, Providence

22 November 2020

“And I will set over them one shepherd.” *Ezekiel 34:23*

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We hear in our reading from the prophet Ezekiel this morning

God’s promise to establish a Good and Just King over Israel –

one shepherd to rule over the people of Israel,

who like contented sheep will lie down without fear of any danger,

upon the rich grazing pastures and the mountain heights of Israel.

This is the arc of God’s promise throughout the scriptures –

in the writings of the prophets –

a Good and Benevolent King who will restore the dignity and hope of Israel –

one who is wise and a lover of God’s merciful ways –

a Faithful Shepherd who will rescue them from every danger,

and will lead them to green pastures, flowing waters, and abundant food.

These images and this promise

would have resonated strongly with the people of Israel –

those familiar with the rhythms and realities of an agrarian society.

This Shepherd – this lover of mercy and justice –

he will also separate the fat sheep from the lean sheep, we are told:

he will reward those who have been harassed and mistreated,

and he will uncover the sins of those who have bullied

and used their brute strength to push aside the weaker sheep.

We hear echoes of this passage from Ezekiel in our Gospel reading this morning:

as Jesus says,

“Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, **33**and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left…” (Matt. 25:32-33)

Now at this point,

you may be hearing this and immediately going to a place

where some are in and some are out:

a narrative of inclusion and exclusion.

And perhaps there is some truth to that – but not in the way you might think.

If you’ve been attending or listening these past few weeks,

you are by now aware as we’ve worked our way through Jesus’ final discourse

in Matthew’s Gospel,

that there are certain themes emerging and becoming clear.

Two weeks ago, we heard about bridesmaids

who were caught off-guard and unprepared when the bridegroom came in the night.

Last week,

we heard about servants who were found to have disregarded the work given to them,

and likewise caught out when the master returned to check on them.

If we examine all of these parables together,

they have at their core

the theme of action versus inaction:

acting upon the word of God as opposed to hearing it only –

practicing justice, love, and mercy,

as opposed to talking about them as abstract concepts.

If we try to engage Jesus in an ethical discussion about faith versus action,

as perhaps an excuse to not act,

the words we heard from the 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel today

will always stand before us and force judgement before our hearts and minds.

Like many of us who live in urban areas,

I am conditioned, for better or worse,

to seeing those experiencing homelessness on our city streets.

Since I rarely have any cash on me these days,

due to contactless payment or use of my credit or debit cards,

I do not flinch when I tell them “I’m sorry – I don’t have any cash on me.”

I reassure myself with the knowledge of the various programs and shelters

designed to meet their needs, and which they could be availing themselves of.

And yet, the words from Matthew 25 will always stand out and chasten me,

serving as a stark reminder to examine my conscience,

and ask myself if I am really practicing what I preach.

If I can’t give them cash, perhaps I could have offered to buy them a meal,

or the very least, taken a moment or two to talk to them,

and listen to their plight with compassion and concern.

Our Gospel reading this morning makes clear

that those of us who ignore and fail to respond to the naked,

the destitute, the hungry, those in prison, the stranger among us –

we will have reason to fear judgment –

reason to fear the look of disappointment and sadness from our Creator,

when we have failed to live up to the image of his likeness,

in which we were created.

If like the Pharisees who pose the question to Jesus,

“What must we do to inherit eternal life?”

we are simply perhaps looking for an excuse for inaction –

an assent to concepts of love and mercy,

while failing to embody them in our lives –

then we will have missed the point.

Now I say that,

not meaning to imply that any of us here

or any of us hearing this online

actually intend to be hearers of the word only,

and not doers:

none of us sets out to actively be like that.

S. Stephen’s in fact does much good work:

this parish has supported the feeding of the hungry every week

through Epiphany Soup Kitchen,

which many parishioners are involved with,

in addition to the New Year’s Day meal you serve annually.

But our Gospel reading this morning – the words of our Lord and Savior –

stand before us and put us in that place of judgment

that continually exists between our Lord’s first coming and his second coming:

the confrontation of our own thoughts and actions

in light of the message of the Gospel.

Lest we fear,

we should remember that the Shepherd foretold in Ezekiel,

and embodied in the Gospels

is one full of compassion and mercy,

loving kindness and forgiveness.

He is a Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for us.

He would only have us practice those same qualities in our lives:

lives full of mercy and compassion,

generosity, kindness, and love.

We may get dirty, bruised, or hurt in the process;

but the life of one who follows the Gospel call

to tend to the naked, the hungry, and the stranger

involves risk and sacrifice.

There’s something quite significant in our parable this morning,

that I hope you noticed:

after the sheep and the goats have been separated,

and they have been either commended for their righteousness

or condemned for their indifference,

both groups ask the same question:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you naked, or hungry, or in prison?”

It’s not just the goats on the left who apparently didn’t see Jesus.

The sheep on the right likewise apparently didn’t specifically set out to see him either:

they merely lived and practiced mercy, compassion, and justice.

They were concerned not as much with their own identity,

as they were about identifying with those who were suffering.

It is in this life of mercy that the Son of Man is revealed – even if only at the last day.

I said earlier that when we hear this parable,

we may get distracted by a narrative of inclusion versus exclusion:

naturally, we hear this and think “I don’t want to end up a goat on the left!”

The irony is that those sheep on the right – that group we want to belong to –

they weren’t focused on exclusion, much less their own inclusion.

But their actions led to the inclusion of more and more and more

within the circle of God’s love.

So what of those goats on the left?

Did Our Lord Jesus come among us and undergo his passion and death,

just so some apparently might not enjoy the reward prepared for them?

I rather think not.

The will of God is for the redemption of all – for all to know his love and grace.

If we want to be like those sheep on the right,

then we are to be about our work,

and to not even worry about the goats on the left –

who’s in or who’s out.

The minute we do that and place ourselves into the group of “who’s in,”

we missed the point,

and we become the Pharisee saying “Lord, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

We risk checking off boxes or to-do lists,

instead of rolling up our sleeves and getting dirty.

Sheep are pretty dirty, by the way, in case you didn’t know – and smelly.

And so we are called to be sheep –

sheep of the one true Shepherd,

whose reign over all of his creation we celebrate today,

on this feast of Christ the King.

Despite many of the images we see of Christ in Majesty,

or wearing a crown,

embodying the white European image of what a king looks like,

Jesus remains a very odd King by those standards.

This day is not about ascribing militaristic might and political power to him:

in fact, in some years, the Gospel reading for today is the Crucifixion –

that moment when Jesus truly reigns,

and the power of love is made most evident.

He reigns from the Cross, rather than from an easy throne.

It is the power of Love to overcome all the forces of wickedness and death

that we celebrate today.

A love that is so strong that nothing in all of creation can separate us from it.

Not even a virus or a pandemic. God is still King.

If we believe and understand that,

then we rightly see how Jesus is the King of King and Lord of Lords,

and that all dominion, power, and authority have already been given to him.

And if that is true, then we have nothing to fear.

I leave you with one final thought:

Incidentally, this same Gospel reading came up this past week during daily mass,

and I recalled how it never fails to remind me of when I was a child:

perhaps your mother or father would give you a list of things to do

while they were away at work, or out running errands.

Maybe it was cleaning, or yardwork, or homework.

You and your brother would argue about who was going to do it,

and meanwhile that TV show was on,

or there was something more important to talk about on the phone with friends.

Oh! The clock is ticking –

mom will be home in an hour.

Well, I’ve still got time.

I’ll watch 5 more minutes of this show –

maybe I’ll make something to eat.

Maybe she’ll run late and I can wait another 10 minutes to start that chore.

Then with only minutes left even make an appearance of starting the task,

we hear the car in the drive, and the garage door opening.

In comes the parent – “well, did you do what I asked?”

We all know the look that we’re dreading and avoiding.

I rather think the parable today is like that –

judgment being not so much banishment to an eternal hellfire,

but having to look our loving Father in the eye,

knowing we didn’t live up to our potential,

and seeing that sadness for a second.

That look is enough to convict us and make us sorry – it is, in a way, judgement.

Like that turkey most of us will put in the ovens later this week,

or the rest of that meal,

the appointed hour will arrive to sit down and eat,

whether we are ready or not.

Did you put the turkey in the oven in time or not?

It’s a yes or no question – there’s no in between or grey area.

If Our Lord Jesus Christ ended up coming back tomorrow,

what would he find?

Would we proudly present this earth, entrusted to our care?

Our oceans, our forests, and all the beautiful creatures within them?

Would we be proud of the job we’ve done?

Closer to home, would be proudly present our state or city,

confident that was the best we could have done?

And then in our own hearts, in our own lives –

will he find a place prepared for him?

Have we gotten dirty, like sheep – or spent too much time staying clean?

We’ve got time to fix it all – we’ve got time, we tell ourselves.

Tick tick, tick tick. We look at that second hand on the clock.

But we know neither the time nor the hour, Jesus tells us.

Will you be found at work or asleep at the wheel?

Will you be found looking inward, or will you be found ready and waiting?

Amen.