

Scripture Reading:
Matthew 25:31-46

Sheep Or Goat?

This is the last Sunday of the liturgical church year. Next week Advent and therefore a new year begins. For this reason many years ago Pope Paul the sixth named this “Christ the King” or “Reign of Christ” Sunday to emphasize the changing of the seasons. In Jesus's own lifetime and in the generations immediately following, to call Jesus Lord was to say that the Roman emperor was not the great authority over human lives; it was to honor the counter-cultural and spiritual dimension of life. Today I feel the point is to ask how does Christ reign? Who is Christ to us each and every day of the Christian year? What does it mean that Christ reigns in our lives?

You may not like the king language, I know I don't, but much like we have been discussing over the last few weeks once again we are faced with a gospel that offers a different way of being. The reign and the kingdom of God is found in the opposite posture of what we consider power and reign in our everyday world and society. God's reign and the person of Jesus is found in the hungry, thirsty, naked and outcast.

This day of summary reminds us that we live in a story that began long before us and will end long after us. We live in the middle of it all. It is not over. We did not begin the life of God and Spirit in the world and we will not end it. Just like last week our image of God is essential. How we see God will without a doubt dictate how we read these last words of Jesus.

Greg Garrett wrote “I must confess that I am always personally uncomfortable with biblical passages that seem to be about judgment... I would love to be able to pretend that this gospel reading is not in some way about judgment, but that would be neither true to the text, nor true to our need to wrestle with it, like Jacob wrestled with that angel, hoping for a blessing. If we're given an answer here, it is this: Jesus singles out those who treated others with compassion, who served those who were in need, alone, despised.

So... this passage *is not* about believing in God so you go to Heaven when you die... The Bible in general and Matthew in particular don't seem to be that interested in Heaven and Hell, whatever those might be. Nor are many of the great biblical scholars. In the 1500 pages of the Institutes of Christian Religion, John Calvin devotes only a couple of passages to Heaven, and one paragraph to Hell. More recently N.T. Wright notes that there is almost no talk in the Bible about going to live in Heaven when you die, and less still about Hell. He also reminds us that the continuous talk about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's gospel is not about a place-Heaven-but about something else entirely, God's sovereign rule breaking through into the earthly realm. (Surprised

by Hope, 18)''¹ If you think the question 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. So 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 if Christ is King?

“The conflict over who is lord is acted out in our lives today even though Rome is long gone. The world still wants us to worship all that is Not-God, and the culture rewards us when we do. But this conflict between the two Kingdoms, one of this world, one of the divine realm, becomes clearly delineated in the life of Christ. Jesus tells us and shows us that the usual things people elevate as gods-temporal power, wealth, celebrity and fame-are subsumed in the Kingdom of God by the supreme values of service, love, self-sacrifice, and faithful community.”²

These are Jesus' last public words before his arrest. This is the image he leaves with his disciples to say what God's reign looks like. This is not to claim a political kingship. God's kingdom is opposite our idea of kingdom. Christ is present among us in the hungry, thirsty, imprisoned and the naked. God reveals God's self under the sign of the opposite.

Jesus says 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father' and what qualities does those people hold? We know these verses don't we?

I was hungry and you gave me ... FOOD. I was thirsty and you gave me...DRINK. I was a stranger and you ...WELCOMED ME. I was naked and you...CLOTHED ME. I was sick and you took...CARE OF ME. I was in prison, and you...VISITED ME. When you do these things to the least of people, you do them to...ME.

We know that when we care for the hungry, thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, we are actually taking care of Jesus who lives behind these faces of these people. Jesus lives within these hurting people, behind their eyes, their tears, their pain. We all know that. Our desire is that we are numbered among the sheep and not the goats. It is our prayer that we not only know who these people are, but that do what God wants us to do.

What I found striking in this passage as I read and studied it this time however is that neither the sheep or goats know who they are. That to me is key. David Lose wrote:

“A... popular interpretative trajectory notes the element of surprise that permeates this story. Neither the "sheep" nor the "goats," as it turns out, had any idea of what they were doing. Echoing a popular Reformation era theme, this reading suggests that perhaps we are justified by

¹ Garret, Greg "If Christ Is King, What Does That Mean?"

² IBID

our faith after all, as our "good works" do not justify us but rather flow unconsciously from the love of God that has been freely poured into our hearts."³

On a side note in the ancient near east you could not visibly see the difference between a wild goat and a wild sheep. And in acadian there isn't even a separate word for wild sheep or goats. Likely that is why Jesus used this example to help us see that we do not always know who is living into the kingdom - in fact we more often than not likely get it wrong.

And perhaps just like the sheep and the goats don't know who they are we don't know who we are either. I am sure we don't always know when we have been encountering Christ. The fact is we have been absorbed into the reign of Christ - we don't even recognize the Christ around and within us. Perhaps we should connect these last words of Jesus with his first words of the beatitudes and discover that this is what it looks like to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

When we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and clothe the naked we are living Jesus. And then the question might become when will Jesus notice those who care for the oppressed? He began the passage with "When the Son of Man comes in glory." For those of us who struggle with the idea of a heaven and hell and a throne of glory I want to point out that once again this image is often misinterpreted to a Judgement day sort of venue. Lose explains it this way. "Jesus has talked about the Son of Man at various points throughout the gospel, of course, but when is this "coming in glory"? Interestingly, the very next verse, 26:1, offers a clue: "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.' So could it be,... that the Son of Man comes in his glory in the crucifixion? Might it be that the place we see Jesus revealed most clearly is in the cross?"⁴ The next time the phrase is used is in the passion narrative which is far from a time of us being judged. Jesus is the one going through the judgement. And yet Jesus comes to glory on the cross, that is when he becomes king because he has made the ultimate sacrifice. And perhaps if there is a final judgement day we might recognize in our fear that we have been told that the same Jesus who lived on this earth and welcomed every outcast and sinner will be the same Jesus who looks and us. The one who will one day come to judge us is the same one who first came to be judged for us. So however we might interpret this passage, we do so trusting that Jesus -- the one who came, the one who comes, and the one who is coming again -- is undeniably and unalterably for us...and all the world. That for me takes away any fear of judgment and offers me hope and light, it motivates me to keep doing my best to live into the kingdom of God here and now.

³ Lose, David workingpreacher.org

⁴ IBID

Garret went on to write “If you love God, if your values are God-values instead of the world's values, if Christ actually is King, then you will love as God loves, give as God gives, forgive as God forgives. If your values are God-values, you can't help but live as Christ taught.

Preaching at Ebenezer Baptist just two months before his death the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “If Christ is ruler over our lives, then my Nobel Peace Prize is less important than my trying to feed the hungry. If Christ is King, then my invitations to the White House are less important than that I visited those in prison. If Christ is Lord, then my being TIME magazine's "Man of the Year" is less important than that I tried to love extravagantly, dangerously, with all my being. (I Have a Dream, 191)”

The continuous story of the gospel is that if we follow the great commandment. If we “Love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and strength and love our neighbour as ourselves” then we will live Christ.

We may not even recognize it when we do but we will care for Jesus in the midst of our every day lives.

May it be so.

Amen.