

The King is Coming

We have been preparing for this feast for the weeks since All Saints Sunday. The readings have been about the end-of-times and what the time of judgement will look like. The Old Testament readings from Amos and Zephaniah painted grim pictures of that day of judgement. Those readings cautioned us against wanting to hasten or bring about that day because it might not turn out the way we hoped it would. There was the very real possibility that the judgement would also be against all those who think that they were in good with God. Through parables, the Gospel readings cautioned us to be ready - watching, waiting and preparing for the day when Jesus will come again in judgement of the creation.

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, Jesus tells us in parable form how the judgement will take place. There will be a separation of people into two categories. From the parable it appears that the determining factor for judging people will be on doing acts of mercy. While there is nothing explicit in the text about believing that Jesus is the Messiah, there is the implicit understanding from Psalm 23 and other texts that those who follow God's ways are like sheep and thus, by extension, these sheep believe in Jesus. However, we may draw an erroneous conclusion that simply believing in Jesus, that is becoming a sheep, we will be at the right hand of Jesus and thus automatically enter into the glory of the Kingdom of Jesus. Another erroneous conclusion would be that it was determined before time who would be a sheep and who would be a goat when Jesus said in verse 34, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." In this verse, we must remember that it was the kingdom that was prepared from the foundation of the world, not determining who would be in and who would be out.

Another thing that we can do from this text is develop a type of check list of what we need to do to enter into the kingdom. The questions would then arise, how many of these acts do we need to do, can we lose the credit for these acts, and are these the only things that we need to do? In other words, it would become the kind of legalism which had developed in the Jewish faith and that which Jesus was against. If we accept that Jesus was changing the paradigm of life that operated under the Jewish authorities, then we would have to conclude that Jesus was not substituting one kind of legalism for another. If Jesus was just wanting to make it so that He was the one who made the rules, that He was the one who defined what we are to do, then there would be no need for Him to go to the cross. He would simply need to call on His followers to take up arms and force the Romans to leave their country.

However, if we do accept that Jesus came to change the paradigm of how we lived and related to one another and to God, then we would need to understand this parable in a different way. At this point, let me say that there is nothing wrong with doing those things that Jesus listed in the parable, the works of mercy. These acts are good examples of looking outward towards others, of treating others the way that Jesus treated others. On the other hand, there are other places in the Bible which tell us that doing these things is not enough to enter the kingdom and that it is not by our own efforts that gain the kingdom.

In order to reconcile these understandings derived from elsewhere in the Bible with the obvious understanding of this parable of the sheep and the goats, we need to understand the parable in a little different way. When I looked at the response of the 'sheep' to Jesus telling them what they did, my first reaction was to think of chapter 13 in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians - the 'Love chapter'. While that chapter has been used in many wedding ceremonies as instructions for how husbands and wives are to be in relation to each other, the original intent of Paul was to give instructions to the

believers in Corinth of how to relate to one another and to non-believers. It is in these instructions where we find an echo of the sheep responding to Jesus in today's parable. Basically, Paul is telling us that love does not keep a scorecard of the actions we do for one another and what is done for us. Paul is telling us that if we have faith, which gives us hope for a better future and love behind what we do for others, then there is nothing else we need to 'do.' Of course, for Paul, it all begins with having the faith, the trust, that Jesus is the Messiah who was sent by God because of God's love for us and all of creation. But, as we hear in the 'love chapter' unless what we do is out of love, our actions are meaningless. If what we do is not done out of love for one another, then our actions become a checkmark on a scorecard. When we do something out of love, then the motive will be for less selfish reasons and more because of the need of the other person.

Applying this to the parable, we see that the 'sheep' did not keep score of all that they did. They were aware of what they were doing, but these acts of mercy were not done so that they got credit, building up their 'heaven account,' so to speak. On the other hand, the 'goats' were acting out of selfish motives. They were looking for some sort of payback. They had a quid-pro-quo attitude, a "I'll do something for you then you have to do something for me" attitude towards others. These goats would have not acted out of love towards others, even if they did those same acts that the sheep did.

In verse 40, most translations read, "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.' However, another way to translate the "to me" is "for me" which gives a different understanding of the verse. The sheep acted on behalf of Jesus, doing those things that Jesus did while He was here on earth. The goats, on the other hand, did whatever they did for themselves, for their own reward, according to their own motives.

Reading the text this way would also be consistent with hearing this text saying that we should be doing things out of love for one another and not keeping score. We should also not be using this text for generating a kind of check list of what we need to do in order to gain entry into heaven.

As we have seen with the parables of Jesus, they can be understood on many different levels, in several different ways. While some ways may limit our understanding of the parable, these ways of looking at the parable can still be beneficial to us. When we look at the parables from a different point of view, we sometimes see a richer text that may be more consistent with other texts and understandings of the Gospel.

This parable of the sheep and the goats can too easily be used as a set of instructions for believers. However, doing this leads us to a kind of legalism that places the responsibility of getting into heaven on ourselves and our actions. By opening up this text to the possibility that the judgement we face will be more why we do something rather than what we do, we see that legalism fade away and our actions are driven by our love for one another and our desire to 'be like Jesus.' May the Holy Spirit continue to guide us along those ways which we can 'be like Jesus' and reflect God's love to one another.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/nzrYTKFXvZU>

Service: <https://youtu.be/7reP9X5ZBSw>