

Christ the King Sunday **"A.K.A. Jesus"**
Nov. 26, 2017
Kenner, LA

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

This is the fullest description in Scripture of what we've come to call "The Last Judgment." Even that term sounds a bit frightening, doesn't it. Yet the description is from Jesus' own lips.

First there's his return itself. "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."

In other words, there will be nothing secretive about Jesus' coming. It will be glorious. There'll be no missing it or misunderstanding it. It will be obvious to all.

This passage is selected for reading today because it's Christ the King Sunday, and these verses portray Jesus as a victorious King, taking his place on a glorious throne, ready to exercise his rule.

Christ the King Sunday also marks the end of the Church year, the way the church marks time. And it's an appropriately majestic portrait of Jesus, but quite different from our normal way of perceiving him. During his earthly life here, he seemed anything but regal. In just a few weeks we'll celebrate his humble birth in Bethlehem, and although the wise-men from the East came in search of the child born king of the Jews, we know that his kingship was quite different. No palace, no crown (except for a crown of thorns), no army.

When Pilate asked him if he was a king, Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world. Rather, as we know, he rules in our hearts.

But in today's Gospel, there he is gathering the nations before him to speak a final judgment. Oh my, is this what all of life, all of human history has been leading up to? A final reckoning?

And just what would you expect to be the basis or his judgment? Wouldn't you think it would be the question of how loyal we've been as his subjects, the degree of our allegiance, if we've been (as the Marines say) *semper fi*, always faithful?

Well, if that's what we'd expect, what a surprise! Because the returning King doesn't focus on our faithfulness to him, but to each other. More precisely, our care for the needy, such as the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, sick or imprisoned, claiming that whenever we've helped one of them, it's been the same as actually responding to Jesus who identifies so closely with them. "Whenever you've helped out one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you've done it to me."

I think it was a short story by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy, in which a man was told he was going to be visited by Jesus one night. So he settled into his chair to wait. But when there was a knock on the door, it was an old woman, so chilled by the snowstorm outside that she asked if she could warm up by the fire before continuing her journey. Certainly, the man said, and after a half hour or so, she was on her way. Soon there was someone else at the door, this time it was a beggar asking for food. The owner warmed up some

soup in the kitchen, and after eating a bowl of it, the beggar left. Not much later there was more knocking at his door, and when he opened it there was a man standing barefoot in the snow. The owner quickly looked for a coat, scarf and some old boots and gave them to the man who thanked him and left.

The owner of the house sat back down and fell asleep. He dreamed that Jesus appeared to him. And when he asked Jesus why he hadn't visited him as promised, Jesus said, you guessed it, three times I've come through your door tonight. Tolstoy obviously knew today's Gospel well. "Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

When I saw the movie "Grand Torino" years ago, it gradually dawned on me that Clint Eastwood's character was a Christ figure. I don't know if the screenwriter intended it that way, but in one of the scenes, after Eastwood's character has saved a young Asian neighbor from some serious bullying, the boy's entire family comes to him wanting to do something for him as a form of thanksgiving, and Eastwood's character tells them to save it, because he doesn't need their help, but instead, they could assist the elderly man who lives across the street from them. That's classic Matthew 25.

Today's passage is a metaphor, and more shouldn't be read into it than it says.

But it's led many to ask, does this mean we'll ultimately be judged on the basis of our actions, our deeds, rather than on our faith?

It's a legitimate question. But then, we can't look into each others' hearts to see if there's faith or not. In a public judgment like the one in this metaphor, how else could a person's relationship with Christ be seen?

It's very clear from the rest of Scripture that we are saved entirely by God's grace through faith in Christ. But as St. James writes, "Show me your faith apart from your works" (which is impossible, of course), "and I by my works will show you my faith" (James 2:18).

The Last Judgment is framed this way because Jesus wants us to understand that faith leads to action, that Jesus enlists us in not only believing and speaking the Gospel, but embodying it, like him, in the world. That our faith must be incarnational, just as his trust in the Father showed itself in his outpouring of love for us. Because we were the spiritually hungry, naked, sick and imprisoned. Once we were no people, once we had not received mercy, as St. Peter reminds us.

Of course we show our faith in God and our love for him in what we do and say. Just as he shows his love for us in what he does.

St Paul spells that out wonderfully in today's Second Reading:

Ephesians 1:17-23

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at

his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.