

Proper 29A
November 23, 2009
Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

Today is the feast of Christ the King. The last Sunday of the Church calendar. Yet, as we might be apt to do on December 31, or on the up-coming Thanksgiving Day, it is not a time to look back at the road we have travelled this previous year. Our liturgy catapults us into the future, and draws our attention to that day when all that we hope for by faith is realized and completed. At times the Church, under the spell of that vision, has taught that that hoped-for day was all in all, and that we must wait patiently and suffer silently until it arrives. That is, I hope we have learned by now, the counsel of the comfortable who seek only to preserve their privileges. It is worth noting that the original meaning of our Gospel lesson this morning is that the non-believing people of the world will be judged on the basis of how well they treated the members of the Church – Christ's sisters and brothers – who, at the time, were indeed among the least of society, the poor, the imprisoned, the marginalized. And this is why both those who are commended and those who are condemned did not recognize Christ in their neighbors, because they did not know him during their lives.

Yet now we read this story – and quite rightly, I believe, as applying to ourselves. This has become the story of our judgment. I remember listening to a professor at the Baptist-affiliated Belmont University in Nashville talk to a group of in-coming students. He asked them how they thought they would do in a class where the professor told them on the very first day what would be on the final exam. All agreed that if they heeded the professor's advice, and did the preparatory work, then they ought to pass the exam with no problem. Then this gentleman read to them from the 25th chapter of Matthew the same passage we heard this morning.

This is the precisely correct reading for us today. For us who have been prone to put far away the day of salvation, who have forgotten that the very reason for the Church's existence is to live out, to embody, right here and now, however partially and imperfectly, that Kingdom for which we yearn and towards which we are most assuredly moving. This is the best way to hear and understand the call that goes forth once again today.

The way to understand the prophecy of Ezekiel is if we ourselves work to gather together those who have been scattered, to bring into community those who have been excluded. This is the way to understand the prayer of Paul for the Ephesians, that they – and we – may at last recognize fully our own selves as the ones through whom the risen and glorified Christ still walks and speaks and heals and loves and forgives. This is the way to understand the promise of Jesus, that he is both the one who ministers through us and receives our ministry. That he is truly all in all, and that this is what it means to own him as our King.

The choice, of course, is ours. We can do nothing, and render this indeed the story of our judgment while hoping that the day of judgment is a troublesome bit of ancient lore that may never come. Or we can work. Work to make this the story of salvation – both our own and the world's – by realizing that the answer to the riddle of tomorrow is determined by our actions today.

So the question is, did you feed the hungry? Not, did you cross your fingers when you said the Nicene Creed? Did you shelter the homeless? Not, what is your sexual orientation? Did you visit the sick? Not, did you interpret the Bible in the only correct way? It is not that the issues of theology, morality, and Scripture are unimportant. But they are not the final exam!

Here is something I would like us all to take home today and think about: Orthopraxis always trumps orthodoxy. That is, doing the right thing is always more important than saying the right words. That's the trouble the Episcopal Church is in today – and not just the Episcopal Church. We worry about the words, and that keeps us from seeing that wherever the work of the Gospel is being done, there Christ is present with our sisters and brothers, no matter what they may or may not call themselves. And it keeps them from recognizing in us companions for the journey.