

In All the Wrong Places

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 Matthew 25:31-46

Let us pray....

If you look at your worship bulletin you will see that we come to that Sunday in our church year which is called the Christ the King; a term that is a mystery to most Christians. This day known as the Christ the King Sunday comes when it does, to mark the end of the church year; a year in which we have read in the scriptures about encountering the presence of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Do you remember the Bible stories from the patriarchs that we read this past summer? The time when Abraham met God face to face to receive God's promise? That night when Jacob awoke from his slumber to see God standing next to him pointing to the staircase ascending to heaven? That day when God intervened in Moses' life to save a whole nation? Those Sundays this past fall when we heard the voice of God speaking to us through the parables of Jesus found in the gospel of Matthew?

Our reading for today comes late in Matthew's gospel; just before the Passion of Christ. Throughout this gospel we have seen people striving to see the face of God. We see people struggling to answer Jesus' important question "Who do you say that I am?"

As modern day Christians we struggle to answer that very same question. Just this past week I talked with a woman who told me she was "church shopping." I asked her "what are you looking for in a church." She replied "I want a church where I can see Jesus."

Isn't that true for all of us? We come here to behold the glory of Christ's face in the sanctity and beauty of this sanctuary. We come here to see Jesus face to face. But how will we know Christ when we see him? What does he look like to us?

In our reading this morning, Jesus is seen separating sheep and goats, rewarding his subjects according to their adherence to his great ethical commandment of compassion. The passage comes in the last great teaching discourse in Matthew, a long section about the end of the world and the time of the completion of the Kingdom of God.

It follows numerous parables about being ready for the Kingdom of God – to be ready for whatever is coming, to be ready whenever it gets here. The Parables of a thief in the night - A slave and a master - A last minute invitation to the banquet - Foolish bridesmaids who are unprepared. All are apocalyptic stories about judgment and being prepared.

The Bible does speak to us about judgment and being prepared but earlier this year I spoke to you that the Bible's central message is the collected testimonies of those who came face to face with the living God and through their experience of God's presence had their lives transformed.

The opening words of our gospel lesson describe Christ as a king on his throne, surrounded by his angels. All in all, pretty appropriate for this Sunday known as the Christ the King. But are there other images that reveal Jesus to us?

Jesus answers that question with his own words found in Matthew "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

This description of Jesus seems at odds with the image of a glorious king sitting on his throne. But is it?

A few years ago I found myself in Altar Mexico. Altar is a town on the border with Arizona that has become a major hub of human smuggling; a place where human traffickers meet people trying to enter into the U.S. without documentation. The town square is a beehive of activity and a place of suffering beyond most of our imagining. As I gazed upon the evil and danger surrounding me I wondered if this was the wrong place to be.

On that plaza you had young people between the ages of 12 to 20 waiting to meet a smuggler who will take them over the border. On that plaza you also had smugglers, known as "coyotes," who under the control of organized crime bosses, waited to lure the young people into their vans that under the cover of darkness headed out into the Sonoran desert to cross the border.

These are the sheep and goats that Jesus talks about; victims and victimizers, people in their misery and desperation who were unable to see the face of Christ. That is.... until the doors of the church opened to them.

As the church bell tolled Father Juan went out into the plaza to gather in his flock; the sheep who were about to risk their lives by going out into the desert. Most of these poor people were thin as rails from only being able to eat every other day. Some of them were bloodied; robbed during the night of their last peso.

During worship the scripture was read and I heard Christ's words "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." My heart was broken for in this simple church as I gazed upon their suffering faces I saw the face of Christ and I knew that from my place of comfort and privilege I was called to do more for the least of these if Christ was to reign in my life.

Sunday worship ended but Christ's face was not to fade from my eyes. Rather than greet worshippers at the door Father Juan took off his vestments, removed his collar and went out into plaza and gathered in his goats, the desperate smugglers; not to judge them, but to offer them a hot meal and shelter from the cold January rain.

As he welcomed these "coyotes" into his church once again I was able to see the face of Christ as I looked into the eyes of these young men who had been forced into a life of human trafficking in order to ransom their sisters and mothers who had been kidnapped by the crime bosses. I was able to see the face of Christ in the eyes of this simple priest who gave of himself so that the goats could come to see not judgement, but the glory of Christ's love. I saw Christ in the face of a man of God whose life was given over to Christ, a life where Jesus reigned as Lord.

That trip to Mexico for me was a life transforming experience. It was a time when Christ was revealed to me not in the face of the powerful, the wealthy; but in the faces of the poor, the desperate, both the goats and the sheep whom Christ gathered into that simple adobe church.

That trip was a time for me when I was able to see that the Risen Christ come not only as one who will judge, but who was judged for our transgressions; as one who cares about the needs of all and who promises in mercy to gather us all in, sheep and goats alike.

If we read Matthew 25 closely then we cannot help but be reminded of the famous line from St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words." We know that we are saved by grace, and not by what we do. Jesus who speaks in Matthew 25 knows that of course. But he seems to also know that the faith and the mercy that come from God's grace create new perspectives, new ways of seeing.

Grace opens eyes to see things that we maybe would miss otherwise. Grace begins already, now, in this time and place to give us a preview of the end of all things.

Grace lets us know that if one day we ask the question, "Lord, when did we see you?" Jesus' answer will be, "When did you see me not?"

In this parable Jesus promises to be always with and for those who are in greatest need. If we want to experience God's presence fully, deeply, and truly; we will look for God in the need of those around us and, indeed, in our own need as well.

If we are willing to suspend our limiting expectations and live into the surprising reality of the God we know in Christ, then we are invited to meet God not in some distant eternal life or other-worldly reality, but here and now, in the concrete and real needs of our neighbors. And once our eyes are opened we will come to see that the God we know in Jesus is revealed not in power but in vulnerability, not in might but brokenness, and not in judgment but in mercy.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, I give thanks for the Christ who always comes to us in justice and in mercy, who meets us in the places we least expect; in the faces of our neighbors in need, in Mexico, in Lincolnville, in homes and hospitals, at a food bank, at an AA meeting, at a homeless shelter.... wherever Christ may call us to serve the least of God's children.

I give thanks that Christ reveals his face to us in surprising and unexpected ways but also in the common every day acts of mercy and love and forgiveness offered in His name.

Thanks be to God for his glorious gift – Jesus Christ our Lord and King.

Amen.