

Christ the King
Nov. 20, 2005

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down.”

Today is the last Sunday of a long season called Pentecost. In many traditions, today is designated "Christ the King" -- a Sunday that looks back over this long season of Pentecost to the Ascension, and ahead to the time when Christ will appear as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The day is one we celebrate with joy, and also with some confusion. Christ the King can be a challenging concept to grasp in a democratic country, which in a few days will celebrate Thanksgiving -- recalling the pilgrims of old, who fled their homeland and their king, in order to worship God in the manner they pleased.

The story of the Last Judgment in Matthew can also be a challenge, since the twin themes of separation and judgment by Christ the King cannot be overlooked in the joy of the celebration. They can be used as a means to confront who we are as Christians.

The scriptures read today are associated with Jesus as King sitting on his throne. Victorious over death, the last enemy, he reigns in glory. He is gathering his people to himself

and separating those faithful to his family, represented by the sheep, and those who neglected his family, represented by the goats.

The picture is an inaugural parade and all are gathered to witness Jesus justice. It's not a beauty contest. Rewards are being given for attention to particular detail, namely, what was done about the members of the family who were left out.

One suspects a bit of embarrassment among the participants at Jesus' inaugural address. Jesus will be a cheerleader for some and a judge for others. Like Santa Claus whose feast we celebrate on Dec. 6, Jesus is going to find who's been naughty or nice.

Ironically, the leadership of our parish has for the last few weeks been actively engaged in calling on the members of the flock, the sheep of Trinity Church. The vestry has been thanking you for your service, encouraging continued support and finding out in some case why that support and presence has been withdrawn. Likewise, the scriptures today speak of God actively seeking out his sheep as well. God finds his sheep in the most remote and interesting places in their lives.

In Ezekiel we read that God seeks out his sheep to rescue them from places to which they

have been scattered. He feeds them; he restores them to the land they called home in Israel. There is a separation process that is going on in God's flock. Sheep are being judged among themselves and the goats evaluated among the rams. He says, "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy." The day of reckoning has come. Accountability has arrived.

What is this King after? It has already been suggested in the last several weeks of gospel readings. The parables of the kingdom talk about a time of accountability. The gifts and talents given so generously now have a price and its time to pay up. What have you done with what has been given you?

Firstly, all Christians have been given faith. Faith is the first and single most important criteria for admission into the Kingdom of God. Without faith, we are told by the writer of Hebrews, it is impossible to please God. Faith puts money into what I truly believe in. Faith in God as my King gives absolute control of my life to him, trusting him for my ultimate well being. Faith is the key for all believers.

Last Tuesday night I had a ticket to hear the Vienna Choir boys. That ticket permitted me to have a seat at the Capitol Theater with 400 hundred other people. It gave me the privilege of seeing and hearing these gifted singers. The ticket and the seat I deserved were based on the price that was paid for it. The ticket gave me an audience to the Vienna Choir Boys. Faith is the ticket that gets me an audience with God and his kingdom.

Is faith all I need to be accountable to God? There is yet another requirement Jesus expects. The audience at Jesus inaugural address is part of his family. He refers to some of them as the “least of my brothers.” All we know about them is that they have been subject to misfortune. And Jesus is very interested in knowing one thing. How did the sheep treat these other sheep who suffered?

As Jesus begins the parable, he uses an image that would have been common to the people of his day. At the close of the day, shepherds could be seen separating the sheep and the goats. The hardy sheep would graze through the night outside in the chilly air, and the more fragile goats would be sheltered from the weather. The image of the shepherd as a leader of the community of faith had long held a place

in the faith-life of the people of Israel. Matthew had previously used the image of a sheep to illustrate that one is a member of the community: "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?" (18:12).

As the shepherd divides the animals into two groups, the beloved sheep find themselves in the position of honor, at the shepherd's right hand, and they represent the saved. It is here that the shepherd becomes the king and the two groups are addressed. The king announces to the righteous that they are "blessed by my Father" (v. 34) because of their righteousness, which was caring for the king when he was in need. They express their wonder as to when it could have been that they cared for the king in his need, and learn it was when they had cared for the needy.

Throughout his gospel, Matthew has reminded us that the command to love God and the command to love our neighbor are the same: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these

two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37b-40). Christ is cared for -- or neglected -- when the neighbor is.

So it is in the Rite One Service we are reminded by the hearing of the Golden Rule that our life as Christians is made up of faith and living faithfully as we care for God's family wherever they may live. Next week we will begin the First Sunday of Advent and we will be reminded of God's commandments in the first part of our service. The greatest of these by which we believers shall be measured are love of God and love of neighbor – they are one in the same. AMEN