

## Christ the King Sunday Last Sunday of Pentecost (28 Pent A)

Christ the King Sunday is a feast to remember the season of Pentecost and a time that looks forward to when Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings. It confronts who we are as Christians as we celebrate that joy, but it also challenges us by the character that is required of a faithful people. Judgment Day is a climax of the Pentecost season that points to Jesus on his throne with all nations gathered before him. It portrays Jesus in the part of shepherd making a separation between sheep and goats.

There are sermons on scriptures concerning sheep that compare human nature with the nature of these beasts. In this gospel lesson there is yet another comparison with that of goats. There is enough animal comparison mentioned here for an entire episode of Animal Planet!

Consider that these beasts were lifelines for the people who lived in the ancient world. The sheep provided clothing and food, as did goats. And in turn the flock benefits from the care and protection of the shepherd.

There are differences between the two livestock that may be interesting to some though not necessarily true.

Sheep get a bad rap as being unintelligent but they can be trained and their IQ tests are just under a pig and on par with cattle. They can be trained, leashed and befriended. The sheep's nature is such that they need to be led to grazing lands. They are prey animals and need to be in groups for security. They are timid and panic easily when stressed. They need caretakers who calm them in the midst of the storm.

Goats are another story. They need pasture as well but they are far more independent, more intelligent than sheep, able to climb fallen trees and are escape artists! Whoever heard of a goat being called sheepish? They can be housebroken and put on leashes as pets. They can eat almost any organic material including wood. They were the brunt of superstition in the Middle Ages which believed that goats whispered lewd sentences in the ears of the saints! A goat's head is used as a symbol for the devil.

The analogy between human, sheep or goat behavior is in my opinion contrived by some preachers. There is less there than is made out to be. What is important to hear is what the king of the parable says to these two groups. One group is blessed and the other is cursed. The blessed group is announced favorably because of the way they treated the king's family members. Those that were in need were treated well and made to feel as human beings should. It is as if the blessed ones reached out to those that were disguised as the very least of the king's family. The point of the matter is that these needy family members were treated like royalty, as the king himself. Family is family, whether poor or rich. Either poor or rich can be found in

prison, naked, or sick given the circumstances. And if you treat his family well, what king or God could forget that?

To love God in the first commandment is the same as loving one's neighbor.

Mother Teresa once wrote:

Being happy with [God] now means:

Loving as he loves,

Helping as he helps,

Giving as he gives,

Serving as he serves,

Rescuing as he rescues,

Being with him 24 hours,

Touching him in his distressing disguise.

--Mother Teresa in *Teachings of the Christian Mystics* cited in *Christianity Today*, February 8, 1999, 72.

How is Jesus disguised in those around us? If only He would materialize as we talked to those who ask us for bread, or shelter, or a listening ear. Perhaps then we might be more attentive to His needs. Or perhaps we might be embarrassed! Christ is cared for -- or neglected -- when our neighbor is.

Jesus equates the Son of Man, a term He used for himself, with the king of the parable. The king pronounces the final call in Matthew's gospel to be ready and alert in caring for the entire planet. It is a call to be found living worthy of a kingdom where a just king judges his subjects based on how they treated him and his extended family. For Matthew being alert and being ready was equivalent to living faithfully to what Jesus had taught.

It may seem that Jesus teaching urges us to be more earthly minded and emphasize this temporal life. Oddly, the words of C.S. Lewis makes us think again: "If you read history," he writes, "you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in.' Aim at earth and you will get neither."

--Cal Thomas, "Not of this world," *Newsweek*, March 29, 1999, pg. 60.

Lewis, though baptized in the Church of Ireland proclaimed himself an atheist. He might have viewed himself as one of the goats. Influenced by arguments with his Oxford colleague and friend J. R. R. Tolkien, and by the book *The Everlasting Man* by Roman Catholic convert G. K. Chesterton, he slowly rediscovered Christianity. He fought greatly up to the moment of his conversion noting, "I came into Christianity kicking and screaming." He described his last struggle in his book *Surprised by Joy*:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen (the college where he taught) , night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. ... I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” (Lewis 1955). Lewis was a stranger to Christianity but was welcomed.

As Christians our celebration of Christ the King will be complete knowing that those who consider themselves on the other side of sheep pen will one day be surprised by joy! May God remove the obstacles from their return to the fold. God help us to be alert and be ready! We do not know the hour or the day when the King of kings and Lord of lords shall come. My He find us ‘semper fidelis,’ “Always Faithful!” Amen!