

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (LAST BEFORE ADVENT)

Nov. 22, 2020

Collect for Christ the King

St. Alban's Church

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I call today the Sunday with the confused identity --- or, at the least, confused nomenclature. It is called *Christ the King* Sunday and has held that name since 1925 when it was instituted by Pope Pius XI. It is also the *Last Sunday after Pentecost* as well as *The Last Sunday Before Advent* or the *Last Sunday of the church year*. Though it was once celebrated on the last Sunday in October, since 1970 it has been held on the Sunday before Advent I. The way we can tell that it's Christ the King Sunday is by the collect which refers to Christ as "*King of kings and Lord of lords.*" In my own mind, given the length of Pentecost as a season in the church year as well as the very special qualities of Advent, it is a sensible thing to distinguish it from all other Sundays, even if we still haven't quite gotten the name right. As a priest, I do know that on a practical level, it signifies that we're not going to be using the color green again until next Pentecost! We even demarcate this feast with the color white before turning to blue for Advent next week.

But the best thing about this day is that on this particular Sunday we read that wonderful passage from the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus says "just as you did it (that is, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or visit the imprisoned) to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me." And surely this goes to the very heart of the teaching of Jesus so that it is a kind of tribute to the entire season of Pentecost, providing us with a summation of the message of Jesus upon whose word the church was founded on Pentecost. If we could just get this right, imagine the kind of world we'd be living in. All it would take would be to come to understand that *what God wants to accomplish he can only accomplish through us and that it doesn't do any good to profess to love God if we can't somehow get it through our heads that this means serving the needs of our fellow human beings who, like us, are creatures of God the Creator.* Such a simple, sensible message....and yet we don't seem to have made much progress toward accomplishing it in the past two thousand years. The world is as full of need today as it was on the day Christ ascended into heaven.

Although we're not actually dealing with an authentic parable here in the allusion to the sheep and the goats, it has been treated as such because it is a kind of parabolic analogy. As such, it is an "implied similitude" to the separation which will take place at the final judgment. We should not be surprised by the element of judgment here, because in Matthew's gospel all five of the major discourses he attributes to Jesus end with a focus on judgment. In fact, the concept of judgment permeates his account. And the general idea here is pretty basic: **"a person cannot be a follower of Jesus and be void of compassion**

which is at the heart of his gospel. Why have so many Christians thought we could have the grace without the demand?”

After all, “a person is not a disciple of Christ on the basis of ancestry, ritual act, or liturgical confession. One is a disciple in actually following Jesus’ compassion and obedience to the will of the Father.” Acts of mercy are “expressions of the knowledge of God’s love.” This isn’t about achieving salvation through good works. The good works we’re referring to here are not done as a means to an end. While we can’t argue that an ethic of mercy is unique to Christianity, we certainly can say that what Jesus brings to those acts is “*a new motivation, enabling an understanding of the extent to which love is willing to go*” because *the life of Christ itself is the object lesson.*

Jesus has been building up to this concluding lesson throughout Matthew’s gospel. He had told his disciples that “unless their righteousness exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees they would never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And this righteousness “consisted of deeds, *not words.*” These deeds are not the sacrifices of the Law, but mercy; and this mercy must be shown to those who are weak.” One of the faults of the scribes and Pharisees was that “they talked but did not do anything, they laid burdens on men (through their oral additions to the original written Law) but did not follow their own teaching. This parable is the last section before the account of the Passion in Matthew’s account, and in that Passion we see how “the *King*, to whom mercy is shown by those who minister to the oppressed, identifies himself with them voluntarily by his crucifixion and death.”

For Matthew’s community, the *Parousia*, the end of the world, the Second Coming of the Savior were living concepts that guided behavior. They imagined that it would occur soon, but they were mistaken. Yet in Matthew’s gospel “the expectation of the imminent end is used...to urge men to charity; but the command to love one another is not dependent upon a belief that the world is coming to an end soon.” And at about the same time that Matthew was writing his gospel, in another place simultaneously, the Fourth Gospel was being composed, and in John’s account “the idea of the end of the world plays very little part at all” even though charity is one of the key words in the book.

Matthew presents Jesus as the “authoritative teacher.” His view of righteousness exceeds that of the official teachers of Israel. Jesus is set over against the scribes and Pharisees. They are depicted as “the embodiment of false teachers.” Thus, this view of these false teachers shapes the discourse Jesus is delivering in this part of the gospel. In Matthew’s mind, the scribes and Pharisees are “blind to what God’s Torah really requires and are hypocritical, leading lives that do not exemplify virtue or compassion for others.” By contrast, Jesus is shown to be “the perfect embodiment” of God’s love. Twice, Jesus directs the familiar words of the book of Hosea at his critics: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” In fact, Jesus directs them to go and learn from the scriptures. Non-Jewish readers might miss the significance of the expression go and learn. For Jews, “learning is not an abstract, theoretical activity. Rather, the sustained

inquiry into the meaning of the Torah and the prophets involves practicing the precepts. Thus, Jesus' words represented a very harsh criticism of his enemies. He implied that their learning had gone astray because it had not produced a lifestyle that conformed to God's will."

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that the conclusion to Matthew's gospel "makes Jesus' teaching applicable to all nations, not just Israel." This shift in emphasis is a striking change of course. When Jesus appears at the end of time as the Son of Man, he will hold all people responsible for their actions "Even those who are not believers will be called to account for their treatment of the lowly, suffering ones whom Jesus identifies" with such clarity.

So, the words of today's collect have special meaning. **"Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.**

Sources

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