

CHRIST THE KING

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

There is something terribly sad in today's Gospel reading, something so easy to miss that it may escape our notice. It is one of the most straight forward of all the New Testament's accounts of judgment.

Here, judgment is connected to actively, to reaching out to those in need, specifically to "the least of these,". These are God's favorites, the ones God sees in a special way.

And it's really clear that those who are condemned are not condemned for doing bad things, or for acting unjustly or cruelly. Instead, they are condemned for the good they **did not** do. We can't sit out the Christian moral life. There's just no way to avoid judgment, by not doing. "Well, I never intentionally hurt anybody" cuts no mustard before the Great Judgment seat of God.

All of which could tempt just about any preacher to shout, "So, lets get out there and serve Jesus in our neighbour. Do good and save our soul from the judgment of eternal fire, all at the same time." Actually that can make for one heck of a sermon, and one most church leaders aren't opposed to preaching from time to time. Good stuff. Can't hurt.

But, for today letus focus on what's so sad in the Gospel story assigned for today. Notice that those who have been gathered up to the right hand of the Lord, those who are called blessed of the father, the ones we want to be, have only one thing to say to Jesus. They say, "Lord, when?" "When was it that we saw you

hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?” “When?” That’s it; that’s all they have to say.

This is so terribly sad because of all the loss, and all the struggle, and all the pain that question implies. These people, the sheep, the saved, the good good ones, they were right, they did all of the proper things, but they missed the greatest joy of it.

They missed seeing the Lord. They overlooked the hidden presence of God in the faces of those they served.

One of the reasons we have this parable, may be to help us avoid that loss, to remind us what reaching out, and caring, and serving can be about at the level of greatest depth. It is abundantly clear from the Gospel assigned for today, that no matter how right we are, no matter how much we serve the presence of Christ in others, if we don’t pay special attention, if we simply don’t look for the Lord Jesus in those we serve, then, like the saved people in the parable, we won’t see him. And most of the joy is lost. Most of the joy of doing good, and being right, and saving our soul from the judgment of eternal fire all at the same time, most of that joy, is lost.

After all, reaching out in love to the presence of Christ in others, especially in both those considered “the least of these”, and also in those closest to us, is quite often a great big pain. It takes a lot of time, and there’s almost never any indication of appreciation, or that anything of lasting benefit has happened.

What’s more, in our minds, “the least of these” are usually partially or totally responsible for whatever problems and needs make them the least. And most of the time they don’t look, or act, or smell, the way we imagine Jesus should. Frequently, they aren’t very nice, and worse yet, they seldom seem to appreciate whatever good we do try to do for them. So, doing good, reaching out to “the least of these”, tends to frustrate us, and we

tend to get burned, and to get burned out. Also, much the same sort of thing can happen when the ones we reach out to are not some distant “them,” but are, instead, the people we live with and around, the people closest to us.

One would think that actually serving Christ shouldn’t be as hard, and as disheartening, as it often is. But there we are. After all, just because we’re doing something for religious reasons, doesn’t mean that, all by itself, whatever we’re doing will look, or feel, religious, or that it will affect us in a particularly religious way.

The Lord calls us to serve him, in our neighbours, in our brothers and sisters, in the least of these, and, often the most challenging, in those closest to us. That call is real; there are no excuses. But the Lord also calls us to see Him in the face of our neighbors, and of our brother and sister, and, we can’t forget, in the least of these. This is a spiritual call, a call to discernment, as much as it is a call to action and to service.

There’s no secret or mysterious way to do this. Two quick ideas: First of all, in order to see the Lord, we have to look at the people around us. Deliberately. All of the time. We need constantly to look as we remember what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what we hope to come from it. We need to look on purpose.

Second, if we want Jesus to show Himself to us, it can really help if we ask Him to. Sometimes we have to ask Him a lot.

That’s one reason why reaching out to others in a way that is not wrapped in prayer, any act of ministry that is not consciously and deliberately offered to God with the request to be shown how the Lord is in it, while certainly not a wasted effort, is terribly incomplete.

If our prayers during the day, and about the day, do not beg the

Lord for a look at His face, or a glimpse at His Kingdom, in all that is going on around us, then we are cheating ourselves, and living barely on the surface of a much deeper reality. To try to live the life Christ calls us to live without placing all of that in the middle of some sincere reflection, prayer and study, is to risk missing the best part of it all. It is to risk missing the presence and Word of Jesus Christ that can transform a mundane task into an opportunity for insight and for joy, that can make doing the things we are called to do, a path deeper into the mystery of God's life, and of our own.

This story of judgment in the Gospel reading today, is more than a call to serve. It's more than a call to be good, and to do the right thing. Sure, it's that, but it's much more. It's also a call to look, to notice, to devote our days, and our lives, in the search for the face of God in all that we do. It's a call, above all, to see.

AMEN.