

Christ the King Sunday, November 26, 2017

Matthew 25:31-46

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Today is the last day of the church year. Next week we are into the season of Advent and a new church year begins. The last Sunday of the church year is also known as Christ the King Sunday, which those of us who have been around the Lutheran Church for a while have pretty much gotten used to. What surprised me when I first looked into this is how new the feast of Christ the King is. It was introduced only in 1925 in by Pope Pius XI as the Catholic church was in the final stages of relinquishing the last remnants of the secular power it had held in many parts of Europe since the early middle ages. It was picked up by the ecumenical movement later in the 20th century, and by 1978 Christ the King Sunday was incorporated into the Lutheran Book of Worship, the old green hymnal. So I have kind of grown up with this church festival, and have come to take it for granted. And I like it a lot. I think it's a great way to finish off the church year, anticipating the end of everything, the goal and culmination of God's good creation, reconciled, redeemed, and made new. God wins in the end. And sin, death, and the power of evil, they lose.

Christ the King Sunday is about who ultimately rules in the world, that is to say, who ultimately is the Lord—who is served. At about the same time the old green hymnal came out, Bob Dylan put out a song that had the refrain, "You're gonna have to serve somebody." Actually it was a little bit longer than that. The whole refrain went like this. "Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." The parable of the sheep and goats that we have before us this morning conveys essentially the same message. When Christ returns as the king in all his glory we will learn who has been serving him, and who has been serving the devil. Because the devil, according to this text, has angels. Now as soon as we read these sorts of texts, our minds usually run to horror movies like the *Exorcist* or *Rosemary's Baby*, or back in classical literature to Dante's *Inferno*. But you really don't have to think of supernatural beings when you hear the phrase, "the devil and his angels." "The devil" and "Satan" are personifications of opposition to God. They are what undermine trust in God's promises. The Bible also personifies other concepts, like sin, wisdom, and riches. And you know for certain that at least *sometimes* Jesus is being figurative when he uses the term Satan, as when he rebukes Peter for opposing his plan to go to Jerusalem. "Get behind me, Satan" he says to Peter. So who is the devil? The devil is that which accuses, slanders, and opposes the will of God. This is how Luther regarded the devil, too – as one whose chief power was in undermining our faith and trust in God. You can think of the devil as a supernatural sort of being if you like, as Luther certainly did, but only if you recognize that biblically the point is the undermining of trust in God, as in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. And the devil has angels. Angels are messengers or emissaries. They are sometimes supernatural beings in the biblical texts and they are sometimes human beings. Think of them however you like. But for the purposes of this parable, Jesus is trying to get across this point: either you will end up serving God, or you will end up serving that which opposes God.

That's the first thing I want us to see in this text. "You're gonna have to serve somebody." The second thing I want us to see is the corporate nature of this story. We are so used to thinking about our faith in individual terms in our culture that we can easily miss the communal and collective dimension which were such an essential part of the culture for which these texts were originally written. Notice that it is the nations of the world who are being judged in this parable, not individuals. This is obscured a bit by our translation. Verse 32 in our version says, "All the

nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another...” But in the Greek, the world people is not there. The Greek texts says, “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate *them* one from another...” I think that our translation is one way of interpreting this, but I think it is equally valid to conclude that Jesus will be judging nations as a whole. And that makes our current political and social struggles in this country and around the world even more consequential. We have been conditioned to think of our faith as a private matter, as something between us and God, and that is at least partly because we place so much value on the individual. But God apparently cares at least as much about entire nations. Now many of our fellow Christians will agree, and say that we need to get back to being the “God-fearing nation” we once supposedly were. They’ll insist that we need to get the 10 Commandments into the courtroom and prayer into schools. But that doesn’t seem to be what Jesus cares about here. He doesn’t seem interested in us becoming more pious. He seems much more interested in how we as a nation treat the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the imprisoned, the sick and the homeless.¹ These aren’t meant to be just the private concerns of religious people. They’re meant to be the collective concerns of whole nations. And so yes, that has political implications, and we as religious individuals are right to be involved in political solutions. What kind of nation will we be? Whom will we serve? Will our laws and policies be a blessing to the vulnerable and marginalized among us? Will all the nations of the earth be blessed through us, as God promised Abraham? Or will we serve only ourselves and the interests of those in power?

The third thing I want us to see in this text is that the goats and the sheep in the parable do not know that they are serving or not serving Jesus. They are not motivated by reward or punishment. Their actions were not calculated, they were just based what kind of people they are. And they are who they are as a result of whom they trust, and therefore whom they serve. So we cannot use this parable to tell us what we need to do to earn God’s favor. That’s not the point. The point is that those who trust in the grace and forgiveness of God turn their focus away from themselves to the common good and the needs of the neighbor, just as God-with-us in the crucified Christ was focused on our good at his own expense. Those actions flow naturally from the faith that is in us.

The fourth and final thing I want us to see in this text is that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. It is already coming right now. Like seed sown in a field, like yeast that leavens a batch of dough, like a net that catches all kinds of fish, the Kingdom of Heaven is happening right now in and through us. God is with us even here, even now, and God is at work giving us both the will and the power to repent, to change our ways and to trust the promise of the gospel, so that transformed by faith we can’t help but live it out in acts of love for those who most need them. God is with us in Jesus and already ruling our hearts when, by God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit that faith takes hold in us. May the reign of Christ continue to grow in and through us, until at last it is fully realized in a world fully transformed by God’s love. And until that day finally comes, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ I’m suggesting that “homeless” is the modern equivalent of “naked” in this text.