

A Different Kind of King

“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” Matthew 25:40

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Today marks the end of the Christian year. In all candor, I am whispering to myself, ‘good riddance,’ as this is a year that most of us would just as soon forget. Even though the liturgical calendar tells us that today is Christ the King Sunday, that day when we are asked to celebrate Christ’s reign over the universe, in truth the current state of the world feels more like the devil, not Jesus, is in control.

It is in troubled times like these, however, that we most need to hear God’s good Word, and be reassured by God’s promises. For what our Scripture reminds us is that God’s people have been here before. Take today’s reading from Ezekiel, for example. The prophet is speaking to all those Judeans who have been living in exile for decades in Babylon, and who have seen their beloved temple destroyed and defiled by invaders. Unsure whether they are being punished or abandoned by their God, the people are in a deep despair. And yet, in the midst of this darkness, Ezekiel assures his listeners that that their God has by no means left them, but like the good and loving shepherd He is, God will gather his scattered sheep, chasing down the lost and the weary, tending to their wounds, feeding their empty stomachs, and protecting and caring for them always.

And not only that: God also promises, Ezekiel says, to feed justice to those in the flock who have abused their power by trampling on the weak. The day of the Lord will come when the least among us will get their due, and the unscrupulous will get their come-uppance.

Ezekiel's prophetic words anticipate, of course, the famous parable of the sheep and goats that is our gospel text today. The parable may seem like a darkly apocalyptic vision of final judgment, but when we look at it more closely, we see the good news that is at the heart of the story. Notice first what the parable says about who God is. The God of this parable is emphatically not some distant power, a transcendent being far removed from the experience of humanity, as we sometimes imagine Him. Jesus tells us, as directly as he can, that God in Christ is fully present in all the struggles of human existence. If we want to see God, we need look no further than into the face of a neighbor in distress – to those who hunger, who are captive to one demon or another, who are sick in body or soul, who feel helpless or hopeless.

The Church teaches us that Christ is present in Word and Sacrament, and these truths are central to our faith. But today's parable takes this incarnational theology one big step forward. For what today's parable reveals is that Christ is also fully present in each one of us, and especially in all our pains and hurts.

And just as Jesus identifies most closely with the least among us, his deepest desire is that we too share His care and concern for those who hurt. If today's gospel is to be believed, when we approach the throne of judgment, Jesus will care not a whit about whatever emblems of earthly prestige, power, and possession we may bring; He will care not a whit about whether we are rich or poor, man or woman, black, brown, yellow or white, gay or straight. The *only* question Jesus will ask us on that day of final reckoning is this: 'so, tell me, how did you treat the least among you?'

The great Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, near the end of his imprisonment by the Nazis and before he was hanged, once said that to be a follower of Jesus is to assume "the view from below." We must, Bonhoeffer wrote, see and feel things from the perspective of those at the wrong end of power, not so much to avenge

their plight, but rather so that we might try, with God's help, to restore their humanity when they are at most risk of losing it.

Put differently, to follow Christ is to see, and feel, and experience the world from the vantage point *of the victim*. The Christian faith is unique among world religions in that we worship the victim of a murder. Jesus of Nazareth was viciously put to death by a society deeply threatened by his willingness to speak out against injustice, by his unrelenting commitment to the poor and the vulnerable, and by his unconditional love for all those persons ignored or unloved by the world.

The Christian faith rests on this seeming paradox: God's chosen one is the crucified one, the purest and most innocent of victims. And yet, Jesus is no mere martyr. By the power of the Resurrection, we are assured of the Father's refusal to permit hatred to extinguish the life of love embodied by the Son. Rather, God stands with and vindicates the Son, just as He stands with all victims. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, once put it this way: what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ teaches us is that "it is with the victim that God identifies, and it is in the company of the victim . . . that God is most clearly to be found."¹

This is why the central symbol of our faith is the Cross. We place a cross at the heart of our worship as a sacred reminder that God not only became human in Jesus, but that in Jesus' life and death, He shared fully in every dimension of the human condition. The crucified Christ is and always must remain at the center of our faith so that we remember that the God we worship identifies most profoundly with the frail and the weak. The good news we hear today is that Jesus is most present where humans are most vulnerable.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), p. 5.

Finally, I cannot responsibly leave this parable without saying a word about ‘judgment.’ Among other things, what Jesus teaches this morning is that our actions matter, and that what we do and fail to do has consequences. Such judgment is a sobering reality. It is sobering because, speaking for myself at least, I know that I act like a goat at least half of the time, maybe more. Perhaps the same is true for you. How then is there hope that at the end of our lives we will end up with the sheep and not the goats?

If the parable of the sheep and goats were the only words we had from Jesus, I’m quite certain we all would be in big trouble. But the task of faithful biblical interpretation is to read texts not merely in isolation, but always in relationship to one another. And we would do well to remember that the Jesus who promises to judge us in today’s gospel is the very same Jesus who elsewhere promises to chase down and save every single, lost sheep; it is the same Jesus who welcomes home with love and thanksgiving every contrite, prodigal child; it is the same Jesus who called as his followers tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers; and it is the same Jesus whose very last act on the Cross was to turn to a repentant thief and assure him of a place in paradise.

In short, while we must take seriously today’s word of judgment in our parable, we must also read these words together with our narratives of mercy. How do we reconcile these competing messages? In the end, I’m not sure that we can. The reality of our God is bigger and more mysterious than our frail human conceptual categories. Just as we struggle to understand how our God can be both fully divine and fully human, so too are we given a God who judges our shortcomings at the very same time He loves us beyond our wildest dreams.

On the one hand, we have every reason to trust in the promise of God’s abundant mercy, to follow Christ without fear, and to hope and pray for the redemption of every lost soul, including our own. On the other hand, and at the same time, we must live our

lives as if every choice matters, as if God is counting on us to partner with him in the redemption of the cosmos, as if our soul and the souls of all those we are called to serve hang in the balance. Stated differently, we sit now and always at the foot of the Cross, living every moment of our lives betwixt the divine poles of judgment and mercy.

Understood this way, true faithfulness leads through, not around, judgment. To say that God loves us as we are is not to say God leaves us as we are. God continually calls us to more compassionate ways of living, deeper and more generous ways of loving, and more just ways of organizing our communities. By reminding us that we live under judgment, God does not condemn us, but He is rather leading us toward a life in Christ, by insisting that we abandon all those fruitless behaviors and attitudes that ultimately destroy us, and instead pursue lives marked by love, empathy, and solidarity with each other.

We should, in other words, be deeply grateful, not fearful, that Christ the King today sits in judgment on His throne. For, in doing so, He is insisting that we embrace only what is good, true, noble and just; He is vigilantly protecting the innocent, the helpless, the weak, and all the victims of the world; and He is ensuring that goodness will indeed triumph over evil at the last. Amen.