

CHRIST THE KING
ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
NOVEMBER 23, 2014

Ezek. 34:11-16;20-24; Ps. 100; Eph. 1:15-23; Mt. 25:31-46

"Thus says the Lord God –
I myself will search for my sheep, and rescue them.
I will feed them on the mountains of Israel.
I will feed them with good pasture.
I will feed them with justice."

Ezekiel, one of the greatest prophets of Israel, during a time of great distress, promises God's People that they are not abandoned –

"The Lord is still our Shepherd," he assures them, speaking words of comfort.
"I will bind up the crippled; and I will strengthen the weak." he says speaking for God.
He promises that their God loves them still – will never turn away from them –
BUT – But, he continues, still speaking for God,
"But many of you have turned away from me," and therein lies the rub.
"That is the reason for your present distress," God tells them, "and so part of my healing love will necessitate judgment.
I must remove the goats from among the good sheep so that I can deliver you," says the Lord.

Nearly a thousand years later, Jesus picks up where Ezekiel left off.
Ezekiel was a prophet that Jesus knew "by heart" – quoted often – loved well.
In our Gospel reading today, just before his passion begins,
Jesus acknowledges that he is Ezekiel's prince who will sit on David's throne.
Jesus reassures his people that through him, his Father is still their Good Shepherd who will never turn away from them,
And that their present and future distress,
Is instead and still a result of their turning away from God.

Listen again to part of Jesus' loving but stern exhortation –
"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angel with him,
then he will sit on the throne of his glory.
(That is, the throne of David)

And he will separate people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."

The faithful sheep from the faithless goats.

The sheep, he says, will go into eternal life;

The goats into eternal punishment.

And the basis of that division, that judgment, is simple:

It is how they treated one another.

That's it.

How they treated one another.

That is the moral, ethical standard that has been God's loving commandments to his people from the beginning.

"You shall love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets," is how Jesus puts it.

The rest of this parable is simply further explanation of that single, simple point.

Love God. Love your neighbor.

The question is, how are we to love God and our neighbor?

Jesus' answer is again quite simple and clear.

"When you feed and welcome and clothe and nurse and visit one another – even and especially the least of your sisters and brothers – you are doing it to me and for me, your heavenly King.

You are feeding and clothing and nursing and visiting ME!" Jesus says.

"And when you fail to do that," he goes on, "you are denying your King – you are turning away from me."

What a sobering yet glorious teaching and theme for us to consider and take to heart on this day set apart as Christ the King Sunday.

The end of another church year and the long green season of Pentecost.

As we look forward to a new year of grace -

Next Sunday we begin our annual time of expectation and preparation –

The short purple season of Advent.

As we continue to ponder what it means to hail Jesus the Christ as our King –

As we look forward to the celebration of his first Advent- his first coming - at Christmas –

As we pray for his return as our Judge in the Kingdom of God.

What is his kingly promise and what is the cost to serve him as our King and Master?

How are we to serve him in our daily lives?

How are we to serve him here at St. Christopher's?
Should we fear his judgment at his return? Now?
Or do we really believe that all this is just some fond fable?
That it is merely some ancient superstition that we can dismiss and get on with our
"goatish" lives.
Do we really want Jesus to be our King?
And are we ready – are we ready now – this morning?

Here is another story about our redneck preacher friend from Chumuckla,
who was leading a revival service for his flock.

After a long, emotional harangue about the horrors of Hell and the wonders of Heaven, he
says,

"A'right now. Let me see the hands of everybody who wants to go to Heaven."

Amid shouts of "Halleluiah!" and "Praise the Lord!"

every hand in the place shoots into the air -

Except for one old man on the front row.

"Deacon Jones," the preacher asks, peering down at him,

"don't you want to go to Heaven when you die?"

"Well, sho I do," the old man replies.

"But it sounded to me like you was getting' up a trip this mornin'."

I do not know about you, but I am sort of with Deacon Jones.

I am not sure I am ready this morning, or anytime very soon.

Not for a trip to Heaven.

Not for the return of Christ as my Judge.

I am not ready once and for all to acknowledge Jesus Christ, and him alone, as my King –
every day and in every situation.

Not ready to dwell from now on in his present Kingdom,

Nor in the world to come.

What about you?

What do you believe the future holds for you and for St. Christopher's?

What are we willing to give up and to take in order to obey and -

"Love the Lord our God and our neighbor as ourselves?"

Ezekiel and Jesus are telling us that we are and will be judged by God -

Judged not by what we have gained,

But by what we have given.

Not by our status,

But by our service.

Not by what we have,

But by what we have shared.

Jesus tells us that no matter the size of the gift of love that we give, he will gladly accept it and will multiply it a thousand-fold –

Like a few barley loaves and a couple of fish.

I hope these words speak to your heart as they do to mine.

I know these are hard words, and I hope I am not alone in having to wrestle with them.

Yet our King's words to us this morning are clear words.

They could not be simpler

They are admittedly difficult, but infinitely important words,

For they give us a map to his Kingdom and the promise of help along the way.

Above all they are words of hope and promise,

And most of all they are words of love.

Jesus, because of his great love for us, is proclaiming his Gospel of grace

Teaching us about his Father of grace –

Inviting us to join him in his Father's Kingdom of grace.

We can and we do join him, he says, by following his kingly map of stewardship service.

There is no other path that leads to the “kingdom prepared for us from the foundations of the world.”

I know that sometimes the path seems too difficult and the journey too long,

That we can get tired and discouraged,

As we minister to those in need wherever and whoever they may be.

As we seek to know and then do God's will.

It is never easy to serve a King.

And it is then that we can and must look to the church –

To this community of faith –

To the meal we share at the altar -

To our brothers and sisters –

For encouragement, and food and water and clothing and care.

And if we ever fail to do that, for one another and for the least of those outside us, we should be and will be judged accordingly.

Jesus knows the path is long and the journey hard for us sinners.

And so do I.

But I also trust his promise that it is the only way, and well worth the effort for the joy we know and will know.

I believe that our King's power and grace are sufficient for the day -
Sufficient to bring us home.

Once upon a time in a small Russian village there lived a man who was a farmer.

He cared for his wife and children, and he treated his livestock well.

He was not a bad man.

But he was a hard man, who stayed to himself and took care of himself,
And did not care for anyone else.

One day our Lord, in the form of a ragged beggar, passed by the man's farm as he was working in his fields, harvesting his abundant crop of green onions, for he was a very good farmer.

"Good morning," he greeted the farmer, but he got no response.

"I am very hungry," he continued, "I am starving. Please, could you give me something to eat?"

The man continued pulling up onions by their long green stalks.

"If I could just have one of those fine onions, it would save my life," Jesus the beggar pleaded.

The man straightened up, glared at the beggar,
and flung an onion at him, which the beggar caught and began to eat.

"Take it," he said to the beggar. "Take it and go away!"

Which he did.

Many years later the man died, and was seeking to enter Heaven, which was on the other side of a chasm too wide for him to jump across.

The farmer looked up and saw the beggar from all those years ago,
walking toward him on the heavenly side.

Now his eyes were opened and the man recognized the beggar as the Christ, and he called out to him,

"King Jesus," the man pleaded, "Please help me join you in Heaven."

"I will," Jesus replied,

And he pulled the man across the chasm and into Heaven
By the stalk of a large green onion.