

NOVEMBER 23, 2008  
REIGN OF CHRIST SUNDAY  
“REAL PRESENCE”

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, King for the Hungry, give us the grace to see you in the least of our sisters and brothers in need and treat them as generously as if we didn't even know they were you in disguise. In your compassionate name I pray. Amen.

Today is the ultimate Sunday of the church year, and it's fitting that on this final Sunday preceding our national Day of Thanksgiving in America that we should be hearing the third of the three end-time parables of Jesus from Matthew chapter 25. Raising the stakes is the fact that this is Jesus' famous parable of the last judgment, that “day of the Lord” about which our Old Testament readings have been prophesying these past weeks. Maybe you remember how the prophet Amos two weeks

ago thundered Yahweh's lightning bolt upon the temple worship of his day:

*“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let **justice** roll down like waters, and **righteousness** like an ever-flowing stream.”*

Right worship, *righteous* worship, simply is inseparable from justice-seeking or it is nothing more than titillating our own religious needs. As I never tire of quoting old Archbishop William Temple, “It’s a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in our **being religious.**”

And then last week, on our Stewardship Sunday of all days, we heard from the prophet Zephaniah these chilling words: “*Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord’s wrath....*”, a word of warning to us 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans obsessed

as we are with our current global financial crisis especially as it's evidenced in our sudden crisis in consumer spending on which our economy so heavily relies.

And now today we hear from the prophet Ezekiel how God will judge between “the fat sheep and the lean sheep” and how because “*you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns,*” we will be judged by God for our wanton aggressiveness. By the way, a little further on in this same 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel we hear these troubling words from God: “*Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?*” Yes, God and God’s prophets were concerned with matters of environmental degradation more than 2500 years ago and clearly laid the blame at the door of the polluters.

So you see our end-time texts from Hebrew scripture have been preparing us for today’s

parable of the last judgment, of the long-expected “*day of the Lord*” when, as Jesus said, “*The Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, when he will sit on the throne of his glory*” and all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats — which scholars tell us is something that ancient shepherds actually needed to do come nightfall.

You’ve all seen, at one time or another, artists’ renditions of the last judgment — of which, perhaps, Michelangelo’s on the front wall of the Sistine Chapel is the most famous. Depictions of the last judgment with Jesus seated usually upon a rainbow with a lily of mercy coming out of his right ear and the sword of wrath out of his left, with the sainted saved flowing into heaven on his right and the tormented damned flowing into hell on his left dominated the altar pieces of the churches of the Middle Ages, terrifying the sensitive consciences of the likes of young Martin

Luther. He and countless others of the late Middle Ages were all too aware of their utter fallenness, driving him and countless others into almost obsessively compulsive efforts to make themselves acceptable to a righteous and vengeful God before whom they could only cower in fear and guilt.

It was only as brother Martin, through his careful study of Scripture, came to see that the “righteousness of God” is not primarily that terrifying expectation of justice by which God judges us but rather that righteousness by which God makes us right with Godself through the cross of Jesus, that the picture of the avenging and terrifying judge on the rainbow was replaced by the gurgling babe at Mary’s breast and then finally revealed as the crucified Savior giving his life for the sake of the world. Yes, God’s judgment—including the final judgment which was to occur at Jesus’ return—remains a part of the story of salvation. But now assisted by Luther’s rediscovery of the original Gospel it is to be welcomed rather

than feared, for it is our very Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who is to be our final judge—the one whose very righteousness has become our righteousness in the waters of baptism.

But judgment—justice as the prophets called it-- must still occur, even if the eternal punishment for our sin has been paid and our misdeeds forgiven because of Jesus. God’s justice marks the eternal order of things—the way things are supposed to be and surely will be upon Jesus’ return. And those of us who are baptized into Jesus’ kingdom movement called the church are called to live toward that new reality, that new order of existence, that culture and kingdom of God which it is our calling as Christians to anticipate and welcome and prepare the way for even in the midst of this present age which seems light ages away from Christ’s reign.

So what is to keep us going in this meantime which is often quite literally a “**mean time?**” What are we to do until “Christ comes again” at the end of time to usher in the

full and final reign of God's time? How are we to spend our time? One answer is that we are to be ready and watchful, as Jesus told us in his first end-time parable two weeks ago—like those wise and well-prepared bridesmaids with lamps full of oil awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom who may arrive at any moment.

But also we're to be like those resourceful and even what we might call entrepreneurial slaves who entrusted with the master's resources invested them well and wisely and who to the master's delight multiplied what he had entrusted to them until his unexpected return. We're to be wise and energetic stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

And finally, today, most clearly of all, Jesus shows us what our waiting and watching and the use of our resources is to be directed toward: compassionate care and concern on behalf of the "least" of our sisters and brothers in need. And lest we want to get too theoretical or theological about it, Jesus rubs our noses in the very messiness and

ordinariness of it all by bothering to give us some very down-to-earth examples: giving food to the hungry, for example, or drink to the thirsty. Welcoming the stranger—what we call extending hospitality—and clothing the naked, and finally, visiting the sick and the imprisoned. Doing precisely those things that compassionate people—think of the “good Samaritan” for example of Jesus’ famous parable-- always do, naturally do, without thinking—actions in which the church can usually be found leading the way.

It’s not rocket science, this matter of doing God’s will on earth. It’s simply doing good to those who need it, or as we found Jesus summarizing the whole law a few weeks ago, it’s simply loving God with our whole heart and soul and mind—and our neighbor as ourself—loving, that is, in the strong biblical and Gospel sense of doing something caring that will make a difference in the neighbor’s life—something compassionate and healing and hope-giving—something real.

But that's not all to Jesus' story of the last judgment. For there's a promise here as well. Not that our good works will allow us to skip over into the right-hand line headed for heaven. No—that's not the way it works. Good works won't make any difference to God's judgment of us. But they will to us. For Jesus' promise is that in feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, in welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked, in visiting the sick and the imprisoned, we will be encountering Jesus himself—what I sometimes like to call the “doctrine of Jesus' real presence” not here in the church where Christ promises to meet us in our eating and drinking around his table but outside the doors of the church out there on the streets of our city where we all are called to meet Christ daily in the lives of the “least” —the lowliest and neediest—of our sisters and brothers.

As we Lutherans are always careful to remind ourselves—and our fundamentalist fellows who are always in danger of forgetting

the fact—Jesus is neither a Democrat nor a Republican and Christians can be either or neither. It’s the values we hold and the actions we undertake that matter—what the emergent church leader Brian McClaren referred to a few weeks ago at our Progressive Christians Uniting gathering in Santa Monica as those “upstream” values that need to shape the policies and priorities of our government and that help us decide for whom and for what to vote—and even here there’s always plenty of room to differ over specifics.

But legitimate care and compassion for the “least of these” is not negotiable for us as Christians. Just last week I read an article in the Times that warned that this time of economic downturn will be an especially difficult crisis for many to endure because of the fraying of our nation’s “social safety net” –of programs like food stamps and general assistance, of housing subsidies and Medicaid and unemployment insurance that have been allowed to deteriorate during our years of strong economic growth.

And of course we must recognize that this is a global economic crisis that will take its greatest toll on the poorest of the poor.

And that's why on this Reign of Christ Sunday, this Sunday before our national Day of Thanksgiving, we dare to call this "Hunger Sunday" — an opportunity for us to respond to the good news that encounters us in Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment by making a generous gift to the ELCA Hunger Appeal — that literally enacts Jesus encouragement for us to feed "the least of our brothers and sisters" both around the world and here in the U.S.

God grant us the wisdom, patience and sense of urgency to find just solutions to the issues of poverty in our land — and around the globe — and God give us the grace to encounter Jesus in the faces of the least of these whom God keeps sending us.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.