

THE NEIGHBOR IS A SACRAMENT OF CHRIST

Sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Dr. Titus Presler
in Grace Episcopal Church, White Plains, New York
on the Feast of Christ the King, the Last Sunday after Pentecost, 23 November 2008
Year A, Proper 29: Matthew 25.31-46

+ *In the name of God who gave birth to the Word,
God the Word made flesh,
and God the Spirit who empowers the Word for life. Amen.*

The Last Judgment Parable of the Sheep and the Goats –
this is the word we hear from Jesus on this last Sunday of the church year,
the Sunday known as the Feast of Christ the King.

Amazing, these words of Jesus to us today!

Amazing in several ways.

**First, after two thousand years this story about responding to human need
compels our attention and our conviction just as freshly and keenly as it did
when it was first told.**

You don't have to be a shepherd or a farmer to understand it;
you don't have to know anything about a what a denarius was
or who Caesar was to understand it.

The sheep and the goats themselves are incidental to the story,
for Jesus says clearly that the Son of Man will be separating *people* one from
another at the judgment,
so the story does not depend on knowing anything about shepherds, sheep and
goats.

No, this story could have been told yesterday right here in the USA.

So old, yet so fresh that it feels self-evident,
in itself a paradigm of spiritual and moral truth,
axiomatic of what faith is and what goodness is.

And so after two millennia it lodges itself right here at the center of our being –
and it lodges itself like a broken wishbone stuck in the throat:
it won't go down, it won't come up,
it leaves us choking and gasping for air.

For here is another amazing aspect of this story:

**None of us can live up to this story, yet each of us puts our own self under its
authority.**

Think of that: none of us can live up to it,
yet it continues to function for us *the* quintessential teaching of Jesus on what it
means to be a faithful and compassionate presence in a world of suffering.

Upon hearing this story, will *anyone* dare to identify oneself as one of the sheep on the
king's right hand,
to whom the king says, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the
kingdom prepared for you . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food."

Maybe you *would* identify yourself as one of the sheep.

As for me, I know I'm a goat.

When I hear this story, a half-century procession of images passes before my eyes:

As a boy withholding a few *paisa* from children begging in the streets of India,

for the theory was that if you gave money to one, then all the others would come
and there would be no end to it.

As a young man, turning a blind eye to the blind, the maimed and the lame lining the way
down to the *ghats* in the holy city of Benares.

In my adult life hoarding resources of time and energy,

rather than cultivating a spirit of generosity toward others.

Failing to respond to numberless needs during my years in southern Africa.

Walking, busy and preoccupied, by any number of needy people in Central Square,
Cambridge, or in Austin, Texas, or in New York City.

Failing to respond over the years to the needs of people in my parishes –

failing to visit parishioners when they have been sick,

failing to drop by when they have been homebound,

failing to reach out when parishioners have been in financial crisis

— all those circumstances have happened among people for whom I was *pastor*,
which means shepherd, and who have experienced my absence, or my
slow and reluctant response.

Yes, to be fair, I have also reached out to many needs,

but I am more aware of the shortfalls, the failures, than I am of the fulfillments.

I've lived more than half my life,

and by the end of *my* season it looks like I will have a losing record —

I can feel the goat horns pushing through my scalp!

And yet, and yet I *still* do not resent this story;

I *still* put myself under its authority,

for I feel not Jesus judging me so much as *me* judging me,

not with a wagging finger, but with the sheer and simple truth.

More remarkably, the story fills me not with despair

but again and again with clarity, and with that clarity comes energy,

and with that holy energy of the Spirit comes hope.

Perhaps you share that experience of this story.

Where does this story's peculiar power come from —

its peculiar power both to judge absolutely

and yet to lift us up absolutely?

We hear this story on the Feast of Christ the King,

when we celebrate the rulership of Christ over the entire cosmos,

but its power does not derive from the office or throne of the king – from anything

extrinsic like that – but from the *intrinsic* authority of the story itself.

The story's power lies in Jesus' depicting *himself* as the needy one,

so that he uses the words “I” and “me” —

“I was hungry and you gave *me* food,

I was thirsty and you gave *me* drink,

I was a stranger and you welcomed *me* . . .”

Is Jesus just speaking figuratively?

Is he simply inserting himself to strengthen his argument?

Is this only a vivid metaphor he uses to drive his point home?

I say, No, this is *not* just figurative personification and vivid metaphor.

No, Jesus is saying something crucial about God and God's action through himself.

Jesus is expressing *solidarity* with the suffering of the human family,
his own identification with those who are hungry and thirsty,
naked and in prison, sick and arriving as strangers.

And remember, this is a last judgment scene,

so Jesus is speaking not only for himself but on behalf of God.

He is saying that *God* is in utter and complete solidarity with the suffering of the human family.

In feeling and in willing, God identifies with human suffering.

But even more than that, **God is actually present in the suffering** —

how? — through Jesus as a human being who also bears the very presence of God,

so that Jesus can say *truly* “I was naked and you clothed me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

That's the wonder, that's the grace, that's the power, that's the glory at the heart of this story —

that's what prompts us voluntarily to place ourselves under its authority,
even though we know we will never fulfill it,

that's what enables it to prod us onward without casting us into despair.

God sharing flesh with us in Jesus means that God shares flesh in the experience of every human being,

so that Jesus speaks real truth when he says, “I was hungry and you gave me to eat.”

Like Time Magazine and others, I am given to assessing who has made the greatest impact in various years, decades and centuries, so:

best known Anglican of the 20th century: Desmond Tutu,

best known preacher of the 20th century: Martin Luther King, Jr., and so on;

well, the best known missionary of the 20th century, I'd say, was not Albert Schweitzer — no slouch, by the way, at reaching out to the needy — but Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

And is it not striking that the catalyst for her mission life was the experience of looking into the face of a man dying in the street

and feeling powerfully that there she was seeing the face of Jesus? —

“I was sick and you visited me.”

Where else does Jesus talk this way?

He talks this way at the Last Supper,

when he says, “Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you” —

not, “This is a symbol of my body, or a figure of my body, or a metaphor for my body,” but “This is my body.”

And so it is that we say the Eucharist is a sacrament,

whereby under the outward and visible signs of bread and wine we receive the inward and spiritual grace of the body and blood of Jesus, the real presence of Christ with us and in us.

So when Jesus envisions the Son of Man, ruler of the universe, saying from a throne, "I was hungry, and thirsty, and naked and sick and in prison"

he is saying that he is in sacramental solidarity with those suffering all these things:

he is really present there —

when we respond, when we reach out, *there*, it turns out, we are actually feeding Jesus, clothing Jesus, caring for Jesus, visiting Jesus.

The incarnation of God in Jesus catalyzes a vibrant circle of mutual encounter, the mutual indwelling Jesus talks about in the gospel of John:

Christ in us, we in Christ,

Christ in the neighbor, we meeting Christ in the neighbor,

the neighbor meeting Christ in us, and so on in a great sacramental sharing of being and loving.

That's the gift of this parable.

With such a gift in prospect, the parable becomes not burden or condemnation but opportunity and invitation!

With such a vision offered by Jesus,

no wonder the apostle Paul is able to say to the Corinthian Christians, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

Here the logic of the incarnation is extended to the company of Christ's followers.

The Church itself is a sacrament of Christ —

sacramentally, the Church is the body of Christ in the world,

the continuing presence of Christ in the time-space continuum.

We the community of Christ are called, invited, offered the opportunity to be the presence of Christ reaching out to Christ present in the needs of the world.

So when every week Grace Church members take communion to the sick and homebound of this community,

Jesus says, "I was sick, and you visited me."

When Grace Church members prepare and serve meals to the needy through the Grace Church Community Center Soup Kitchen,

where the numbers are growing in the current economic crisis of the country,

Jesus says, "I was hungry, and you gave me to eat."

When this congregation as a whole through its facility reaches out to women through Samaritan House, located upstairs in the Parish House,

Jesus says, "I was troubled, and you hosted me."

When children come daily to the Day Care Center which is located in the Parish House and run, like Samaritan House is, by Grace Church Community Center,

Jesus says, "I needed a place to be, and you took me in."

When members of this parish reach out in mission to the needs of congregations and dioceses in the West Indies through Caribbean Ministries,

Jesus says, "I was weak, and you strengthened me."

When any of you reach out to the world beyond yourself, whether near at home or far
away,

Jesus says, "I was needy, and you were there for me."

That doesn't sound like a king or a monarch of any kind,
but that's the kind of ruler God we have in Christ Jesus.

Jesus exercises authority not through pushing around
but being with and in those who are pushed around.

It is in that sacramental union that we discover the reality of what Jesus called the
Kingdom of God
the inbreaking reign of God in the human story.

When you touch that world, you touch Christ!

That is the invitation.

That is the gift.

*And now to God who sits upon the throne and to Christ the Lamb
be worship and praise, dominion and splendor
forever and ever. Amen.*