

Feed One Another

*One day a man said to God, “I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like.” God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a pot of stew. It smelled delicious and made the man’s mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin, sickly, miserable. They were holding spoons with very long handles and though each found it **possible to reach the pot of stew**, because the handle was so long, they could not get the spoons into their mouth. The man shuddered at the sight of misery. God said, “you have seen Hell.”*

Behind the second door, the room appeared exactly the same. There was a large round table with a delicious pot of mouth-watering stew in the middle. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished, laughing and having a wonderful time. God said, “You have just seen Heaven. Salvation only requires one skill. The people learned to share and feed one another, while the greedy only think of themselves.”

The world is at war: bloodletting flows, systems are collapsing, governments are dysfunctional, the economy serves primarily the rich, institutions are in shambles, poverty runs rampant, violence is a way of life, disregard for human life prevails, absence of human dignity looms, destruction of the natural world increases, pessimism and powerlessness are evidenced everywhere, the rise of tyrants is ripe, and...well, you can continue the litany of lamentations.

This description is not of the world of 2023 – tho it might be. No, this is Sr. Carol Zinn’s description of the state of the world in 1925 when Pope Pius XI established the feast of Christ the King to *remind the faithful of **who they are and whose they are***, even in the face of the confrontation of world powers seeking domination between the World Wars. The Feast was originally set for the last Sunday in October as a reminder that Christ reigns in this world and will one day judge all of humankind as to how we lived his message of peace, unity, hope, compassion, and love.

In 1969 Pope Paul VI, focusing on the impact of communism and the cold war realities at **that** time, moved the feast to the **last** Sunday in Ordinary Time and renewed attention to the feast as the way to end the liturgical year – reflecting on the time when ***humankind will answer*** for our way of living in this world: individually and collectively.

Are we growing closer to God? Do we believe that our actions bring God’s love to the world? How have we treated others? All of creation? How is it that we are still at war—*within* ourselves, *between* one another and *among* nations? How do we not hear the voice of our good shepherd pointing the way to life? How can we continue to turn a blind eye to the needs of our sisters and brothers, near and far? How do we drift so far away from living as creatures who know they are loved and as followers of a shepherd-king whose *heart bursts for each one of us?*

Our readings today offer us three different visions of the final days. The **first**, from the prophet Ezekiel, suggests that, at the end of the world, God will finally appear as the good shepherd to rescue the lost and forsaken. Because the rulers and religious leaders have sought only their own good, God promises to come and seek out the lost, bind up the wounded, and provide pasture for all. That is a **typical** apocalyptic – end-of-times – vision: The good will be vindicated and the wicked will lose what they might have had. However, the image of ***the vindicator*** is **not** typical, rather than a fierce, imperial monarch – it is a gentle shepherding God who redeems and restores what others have neglected.

Matthew's Gospel gives us a most stunning image of the end times. The image from Matthew *recognizes the responsibility of the people themselves*. In Ezekiel, they were passive and their fate was determined by their shepherds. They just followed where they were led — literally a lot more like sheep than human beings gifted with conscious awareness. Jesus described the *criteria that will be used* to determine whether we inherit the kingdom or not. “For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.”

Notice that *both* the sheep and the goats **ask the same question**: “When did we see **you**?...” They did not recognize Him. The “sheep” cared for those in need **not** because of some mystical vision... or sense of obligation... *but because it was the “right” (the “righteous”) thing to do*... The goats, on the other hand, by failing to see the need, by spurning God's little ones, rejected all that God offered them... They sealed their fate by closing their doors.

The **third** image comes from Paul's faith in the **universal effects of Christ's resurrection**. Paul – the Apostle to the world – looked to the time when God will be all in all, when *everyone and all creation* is drawn into the life and love of God.

All three images are deeply rooted in our faith tradition and reveal something about God, God's reign and where this universe is headed. *All three images see God's love at the heart of human history and the history of the universe itself*.

The first image emphasizes God's saving love and grace, reminding us that our **life is a gift and the God named Emmanuel will be with us always**. The second image reminds us that **we have been given freedom and that, as we choose how to live, we are fashioning our eternal future**. The third way of looking at the end goes along with what scientist theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin see as Christ the Omega Point who is **drawing all creation toward being caught up in the very energy of God**.

Together these teachings tell us that **our vision of the end to which we are journeying will affect every step we take along the way**.

Along this journey, there are moments when we need the comforting image of God as shepherd to assure us that *what is beyond our control has not escaped the realm of God's potential to save*. At other moments, we need to be confronted with the reality and consequences of the distinction between sheep vs. goat-like BEHAVIOR, reminding us that *the choices we make create our future – and effect the future of ALL with who we share this world*. Both of these lessons can lead us to Paul's hope filled vision of union with God and all God's creation...

In the end what actually gets us into the Kingdom – what actually builds the kingdom – *is how we treat the least among us*. I know... it can be SO difficult to recognize Christ in the person who smells badly, or cuts you off in traffic, or knows just which of your buttons to push & when! We have our prejudices about, say ... those who come to this Country without “proper” documentation, about who is “worthy” of public assistance... God only knows just how challenging an addicted family member can be. Yet, where we do not expect, where we'd rather not look—there is the person of Christ. They do not have to be destitute—the least among us can be right under our nose.

As I've reflected on this Gospel passage this week, I've been reminded of how frequently it is chosen by family members when planning a funeral liturgy – or if they didn't think of it – how eagerly they embrace it once it is suggested as a fitting reflection on their loved one's life — — and not without good reason:

I was reminded of our Jim Fitzpatrick who devoted his life to caring for his brothers each of who had disabilities; just recently we heard of Mia Sherwood driving her car over the curb into Comfort-Tyler Park to disrupt an assault on a young University Student...; when sorting through Fr. Tony Keefe's files and books, we

found hundreds of dollars which he tucked away ear-marked to be passed out to the our sisters & brothers asking for assistance at street corners...; our Jack Ziegler for establishing what is now the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) ... I don't think I can count (or name) all the moms remembered for always mothering their children's friends in need... Each in their own unique, quiet ways caring for Jesus' brothers and sisters... It's clear to me that **we** know how to judge whether one – including ourself – is a sheep or a goat...

Throughout this liturgical year in Matthew's Gospel we've heard again and again Jesus' vision that radically reverses our expectations: Beginning with his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's Jesus insists upon **righteousness** that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, then goes on in the Beatitudes to explain just what such righteousness looks like **in action** (remember all that stuff about turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, loaning money w/o interest, not just avoiding murder & infidelity – but rooting out the anger & lust the precipitates it...?). Matthew's Jesus rejects acclamation as "Lord" from those who fail to **do** what he says. He relates the parable of the two sons, one of whom promises to do as he is commanded but does not follow through, while the other refuses but then goes and actually **does the work**, the 5 virgins who actually came prepared with enough oil... Matthew is all about **doing what Jesus says**, and this parable about the end of times fits that pattern.

Diana Butler Bass writes in her book, *Freeing Jesus*, about this reversal of understanding who God is in Jesus Christ, and suggests we talk more about the *kin-dom* of God (as we typically do here at All Saints) rather than the *king-dom*. She writes that Jesus "used 'kingdom of God' to name an alternative 'order of things' over and against the political context of the Roman Empire and its Caesar, the actual kingdom and king at the time."

Butler Bass goes on to write that "kingdom" has become a corrupted metaphor, one misused by the Church throughout history to make itself into a triumphalist image of an earthly kingdom. "Kingdom" is not a call to set up our own empire. In contrast, 'kin-dom,' is an image of *la familia*, the .. **family of God working together for love and justice.** "Kin-dom" is a metaphor, an image much closer to what Jesus intended.

Butler Bass tells us: "Jesus the Lord is our kin. The kind Lord is kin to me, you, all of us—*making us one.*" He is for all of us our next-of-kin. "This is a radical reversal of the image of kingdom and kings and does away with the pretensions and politics of earthly empires. Jesus calls forth a "kin-dom:" a community of *siblings* equal in dignity and responsibility.

Embracing this metaphor however, requires that we let go of the imperial monarch vision of salvation. So it can be frustrating when we discover a very different Jesus. Instead of one who fixes everything in an instant, Jesus is the one who walks with us through a lifetime ... including the darkest valleys.

Jesus is also the one who calls us to lives of service—and again and again as we care for the needs of others we discover the face of Jesus himself in the lost, the last, the least ... and, mostly, in one another... all kin.

This Feast of Christ our Kindred Shepherd, can be of great help, I think, in encouraging us to reframe our expectations of what it means to be the Body of Christ, the church... as we continue our synodal journey.

Regardless of any other distinction, we all share the same human condition, we are all part of one Body.... The ultimate criterion of judgement is all about people taking care of one another. "For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink..., AND: "The truth is, every time you did it for the least, you did it for me."

At the end of this liturgical year, at the end of the calendar year, at the end of each day and at the end of our last day, the real question is **will** we hear the words of Matthew's Gospel spoken to us: 'Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kin-dom prepared for you from the creation of the world!

"Salvation only requires one skill. The people learned to share and feed one another"

Amen!