

November 22, 2020
Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus,
Christ the King
Matthew 25:31-46

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, 32 and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

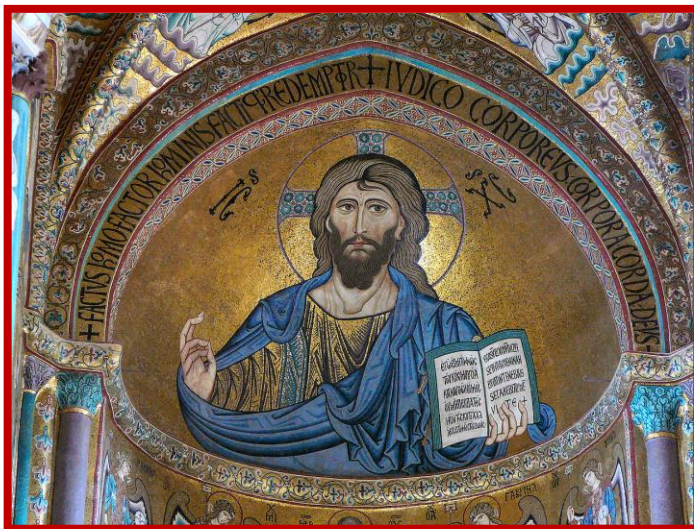
33 He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' 40 And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

41 Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' 44 Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' 45 He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' 46 And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Background

This is the last Sunday of the Liturgical Year and is always the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus, Christ the King. The gospels for last two Sundays have been preparing for this feast and its focus on the end of time when all will come before God. The parable of the ten virgins waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom encouraged the Christian community to remain vigilant. The parable of the master who gave his three servants talents to use while he was absent asks the Christian community to recognize that they have been richly blessed and to reflect on how they have used those blessings.

Equally important to what has gone before this gospel is what follows. From this point forward, the final events of Jesus' life will be described. Matthew begins the next chapter "When Jesus finished all these words, he said to his disciples, 'You know that in two days' time it will be Passover, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.' Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they consulted together to arrest Jesus by treachery and put him to death. But they said, 'not during the festival, that there may not be a riot among the people,'" (Matthew 26:1-5) The next thing Matthew describes is the anointing of Jesus' head with costly perfumed oil. Jesus remarks that this had been done in preparation for his burial. As Matthew unfolds the events of Jesus' own passion and death, the image of Christ as King stands in stark contrast to the events that will follow.



Christ Pantocrator mosaic in Byzantine style from the Cefalù Cathedral, Sicily

There is a contradiction between who Jesus really is and the reality of his life. That contradiction can help the disciples live faithfully with the contradictions in their own lives. The image of a shepherd separating sheep and goats would be familiar to people in Matthew's community. Sheep and goats were the first animals to be domesticated. They were pastured together. At night, the sheep could be left outside, but goats needed protection from the cold. When sheep were slaughtered, they seemed to accept their fate, offering no resistance or crying out. In this, they modeled honorable masculine traits--that men were expected to accept and endure the hardships of life without complaint.

The "sheep" are gathered on the favored right side because they are more valuable. The criteria for being separated to the right or to the left are not prayer, ritual observance, belief, or even outstanding generosity or compassion. Being counted among the favored requires that one has provided the most basic of human needs for others: food, water, clothing, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. Even though both the blessed and the accursed did not recognize Jesus, he identifies himself with the "least brothers." The text indicates that this least is the foreigner, the outsider, and those less fortunate within the community.

Earlier in the gospel, Jesus states that those who receive his disciples as they go about preaching will be rewarded. "And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple--amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward." (Matthew 10:42) There is also a sense in Matthew that those who come in the name of God come with the authority of the one who sends them. "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." (Matthew 10:40) Here, the text suggests that caring for the needs of the little ones or choosing to ignore their needs is taken, by Christ, as a sign of one's acceptance/rejection of Christ who has sent them.

Reflection Questions

1. Try to imagine the scene as Matthew describes it in the first two verses of the text: The Son of Man in glory, all the angels are present, the throne, and every person of every nation is assembled. Pretend for a few minutes that you have the means to commission a group of artists to capture this scene on a large wall. What would you tell your artists that you wanted included in the image?
2. Given the changes that been part of your life during the last year, how has your view of yourself, others, and world around you changed?
3. Who are the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the ill, and the imprisoned in your community? How are they different from those who are poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, etc.?
4. What do you make of the fact that in the gospel both groups did not recognize their significance to Christ in their interaction?
5. Why do you think the Church has selected this text for the feast of Christ the King?
6. Can you talk to God about how you feel about this parable, or about whatever has risen within you as you prayed and reflected on this gospel text?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. <https://fsccl-calledtobe.org>

