

Christ the King Sunday
The Last Sunday after Pentecost
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
November 22, 2020
Matthew 25: 31-46
James Lott

Today this long season of Pentecost ends. Next Sunday, as Kristen reminded us in her “Wednesday Words”, marks the beginning of Advent, the New Year of the Church’s calendar. It has been six months since we read on May 31 the story of how fire and wind revealed to the followers of Jesus that the Holy Spirit was coming upon them and that they as individuals and as a community were being transformed into the body of Christ. It has been a strange season, marked by isolation and anxiety and fear, disruption of routine, denial of the pleasures of social gatherings and travel, the cracking of financial security, and for many the loss of health and even of loved friends and family members. The Covid 19 pandemic has been compounded by a toxic political environment that seems, like the physical virus, to be going on and on and on, duplicating and reproducing itself like some outer space monster in a low-budget sci-fi movie. There is - at last - promise: vaccines, we are assured, are on the way, and in the meantime we know that washing our hands, keeping our distances, and wearing our masks can prevent

or minimize the spread of the disease. And we can transform those inconveniences into acts of love by seeing them as ways to protect everyone around us. The structures of our democracy, we are also assured by reasonable voices, though under attack, are strong and resilient, and this social political virus too will come to an end. We just have to wait. Be patient and wait. Be kind and wait. Just a bit more.

Given all that, it is appropriate that we are moving forward now into that part of the Church year which has as its main theme: wait. More specifically, wait and watch, not just because the viruses in our physical and political worlds will end, but because the Savior of the World is coming.

Today is a kind of pause. Today's Gospel is a look forward to the culmination, the end of time and the beginning of eternity. It is a kind of Advent story. Today we celebrate the Son of God who, in the words of the Collect, is "the King of kings and Lord of lords." The lesson we read today is the last parable Jesus gives in Matthew's gospel. In the parable, Jesus asks his disciples to imagine the Son of Man in glory accompanied by angels and sitting on a throne where, like a king, he passes judgment on his people. In this case his "people" are described as "all the nations." This is a vision of the universal Christ as King of all that is. Jesus has never referred to himself as a king (though the celebratory crowds on Palm Sunday have hailed him as restoring the Kingdom of David and though after

this point he is referred to both in accusation and in mockery as “King of the Jews.”). Throughout the Gospels, however, Jesus has compared himself to a shepherd, and here he uses the same comparison, but this shepherd is also a king and judge who separates sheep from goats and declares that the sheep will go into eternal life and the goats into eternal punishment. It is very different from the story of the shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep to go looking for the one that is lost. Nor is there any gray in this story: it is a stark black and white contrast between those who serve their fellow men and women and those who do not. It is as if the good Samaritan has become a sheep and the priest and lawyer who passed by on the other side have been transformed into goats, and the Samaritan is receiving his reward and the priest and lawyer their well-deserved punishment.

We misrepresent this parable if we deny its starkness. If we try to ignore that it describes a moment of final reckoning, when there is no more time to dawdle, to put off a decision, to stand in the doorway. Time will have a stop, the parable says, and clarity will inform and illuminate judgment on the choices we have made. We will see clearly; we will know the truth. That is so, but we should remember this is a parable, not a literal description of a heavenly judge consigning some to Heaven and others to Hell. (Note that the words Heaven and Hell do not appear in the story.) The scene Jesus describes is a symbolic and a powerfully poetic judgment that describes extreme behavior separating the sheep and the

goats, and we can begin to see this if we ask where we are in the parable. Are we among the flock of sheep or are we herding with the goats? Isn't it likely that we are both? Most of us feed the hungry sometimes and fail to do so at other times; we do and do not clothe the naked; we do and do not welcome the stranger; we do and do not visit the prisoner. We are all – except perhaps the truly saintly and the purely evil if such there are – both sheep and goat, oddly formed hybrids well-beloved of God, performers of virtues of commission and sins of omission. I do not believe that the parable is an attempt to describe how God as judge looks at us. I believe it admonishes us in our sheep-goat natures to examine how we look at ourselves and how we look at God. And how we can find our true selves and how we can find God.

When Jesus tells this parable, he is aware that his time with his disciples is coming to a close. The passage in Matthew that follows this parable is this: “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’” The time for Jesus’ final judgment by and in the world is only two days away, and all these followers, sheep and goats, are going to be left alone, without a shepherd. Or so it seems.

In the Gospel lessons for the past two Sundays, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his absence. The story of the ten bridesmaids is also the story of the

missing bridegroom who fails to show up at the expected hour, and the story of the talents is also the story of the missing master who leaves and who seems to stay away forever. Both the bridegroom and the master show up at unexpected hours. The disciples have been asking Jesus when the final days will arrive and Jesus has told them that no one knows that and instead he has answered a different question: how should we act in the meantime? So these two parables are stories about the absence of Jesus and about how his followers should respond when they feel him not as a presence in their lives but as an absence. They are parables about faith: the 5 wise bridesmaids bring extra oil because they have faith – they trust – that the bridegroom will arrive even though it not be until midnight or maybe even 3:00 A.M.. They trust that he will arrive and then there will be a wonderful wedding celebration. The 5 foolish bridesmaids assume they know the hour and prepare only for an early arrival, maybe 4:00 p.m. at the latest. After that, they deny to themselves that he will arrive at all and therefore they don't bring extra oil and must spend the hours after midnight banging on the locked door of the wedding hall. The two slaves who double their talents do so in faith that the talents are gifts which they are free to increase because their master has told them to do so and has given them the freedom to do his will and when their master returns he will reward them. The slave with one talent assumes that the master is harsh and will judge him negatively so he buries his one talent. It is an act based not on trust but on

fear. The slaves who have faith are invited – in Jesus’ words – into the joy of their master. The slave who does not have faith gets – in a formula Jesus has used before – outer darkness and gnashing of teeth.

We don’t have to take the images literally to understand that Jesus is describing a choice: we can choose trust in God’s love and hope for the joy of his presence, or we can choose distrust and denial and spend our lives in darkness. Whether we choose trust or denial, however, it is the case that God often seems absent from our own lives and from the world. We often find ourselves the waiting bridesmaids and the slaves doubling their talents but waiting for their master.

In today’s parable, the phenomenon of Christ’s absence becomes the phenomenon of Christ’s hidden presence. Look, Christ the Shepherd King says, I was here all along. I never went away. Not really, though you had to wait for me to return. I was always here – I am here – in every hungry, thirsty creature, in every stranger, in every naked or sick man or woman or child, in every prisoner. I am here in every victim of injustice or racial cruelty; I am here in every orphan and refugee, in every homeless person, in every person ravaged by addiction or mental illness. So when you offer help and love to any of the least of these, when you comfort and heal, you are doing all that to and for me. And when you don’t respond in loving kindness to those poor souls, you are also rejecting me. I am there deep in their wretchedness.

This is of course the Golden Rule – “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” But it is the Golden Rule deepened into an understanding about what is false and what is real. What is false is our delusion that we are separate from one another and from Christ; what is real is that we are all one, united in Christ. Christ lives in each of us and we are bearers of Christ to one another. This is Emmanuel: God with us. This is Incarnation: God dwelling in our brothers and sisters and in us.

If this is true, and we can know it to be true not through thought or feeling but through faith and trust and love (both what we give and what we receive), then when we do something as simple as giving food to the hungry in loving concern, we are affirming our unity with all hungry people, with all humanity and with Christ. When we welcome the refugee, we are affirming that Christ is a refugee who needs our welcoming and who welcomes us in return as refugees seeking him. We are participating, we are living in, the Kingdom of God. And this is true, as the parable insists, even if we do not know consciously exactly what we are doing. Even if we do not realize that Christ is here, in ourselves and in others, in fact in all creation. When we pray, as we should, that God be with us and with others, we are really affirming that God is already and at all times with us and all others and we are asking for the grace to trust that it is so. And when we serve others we are serving Christ and Christ is serving us.

The opposite is true as well. When we as a person or as a community or as a society decide not to practice love by taking care of the needy, then we as a person, community, or society are saying no to the Kingdom of God. We are saying we are uninterested in God's promises and uninterested in God. We are doing all over again what the ungrateful citizens did in another of Jesus' parables when they turned away from the king's invitation to the banquet. And when we make that decision, we create our own darkness: the darkness of separation from others and from God. No wonder our teeth gnash and we weep and wail. We can hear those sounds all around us. Just watch the news and listen.

The message for us today – in this troubled period of isolation and waiting – is that God is always here even when he seems absent. The Kingdom of God is always coming and the Kingdom of God is always here even if we don't see it or feel it. We can have glimpses of it through quiet times of contemplation and prayer, through flashes of beauty and moments of unexpected peace, through touches – even virtual touches – of loved ones, and – as in today's parable – through kind and loving service to others. God is always arriving and God is always here. We are always waiting and yearning but we are always in His presence. This is the Divine Paradox, and this is what it is to be human, the recipient of God's love even when that love seems invisible, even when it seems absent.

As Matthew tells the story, after Jesus has told his last parable and announced to his disciples that he will be crucified in two days, he goes to a party, a dinner given by a man known as Simon the Leper. As everyone is eating and drinking, a woman – unnamed but later identified by some as Mary of Magdalene – enters the banquet room, comes up to Jesus and pours costly ointment from an alabaster jar on his head, anointing him. His disciples are shocked and say that the ointment is being wasted and that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. And that makes sense. It seems to be a prodigal waste of a valuable resource. But Jesus defends the woman and says that what she has done is good. “She has prepared me for my burial,” he says to his disciples. Then he adds, “Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

I like to think of this woman as an example for all of us. It is as if she has stepped forth from the parable of the sheep and goats, a woman serving the man Jesus, recognizing that he is going to die and responding in love and pity by anointing him. Willingly serving him in an elaborate, even a prodigal way. I am not sure she knows this man Jesus is the Christ but she serves because she loves.

My prayer for us is that we may find the joy of serving Christ in the joy of serving one another and that we recognize through that joy that we are all one in the divine body of Christ. Thanks be to God.