

Christ the King Sunday. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 25:31-46

There is a story about Saint Lawrence who was one of seven deacons in the church at Rome, in the middle of the second century. Rome, surrounded on every side by threatening enemies, and in a near state of financial collapse, desperately needed money to finance its armies. According to this legend, a high ranking official in Rome, demanded that Lawrence hand over the treasure of the church. In response, Lawrence assembled all the poor people, to whom he had already given away the possessions of the church, before the Roman official, and Lawrence stretched out his hand to them and said to the official; "These are the treasures of the church". The Roman official was so infuriated, that he had Lawrence slowly burned to death.

I've always found today's scripture text from Matthew's Gospel, particularly sobering and challenging. Our gospel reading for today is not a parable. It is, instead, a vision of the Last Judgment, when Christ Jesus returns to this world in power and in glory.

Contrary to the way it is usually interpreted, the passage does not direct our attention so much to the future, as it does to the present, and the ways in which we respond to Christ in the present.

The main point of this passage is not that Christ is merely present in an indefinite future, instead the message, is that Christ is here in the present with us, but too often we fail to recognize Him.

I would like for us to examine 3 fundamental questions that I believe that this text is addressing: First, where is Christ present? Second, in light of this passage, what is to be our response to Christ? And third, why is Christ's presence in the poor, good news for us?

*First, where is Christ present? From hearing this gospel narrative, we might be tempted to conclude that Christ is simply present at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, exalted on the throne of judgment.

Although this is true enough, there is another more important point that is being made. Although Christ is present with God in exaltation, He (Christ) is also present with us in this world.

Christ is present in our world, but not the way we expect. As the theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote about Christ, "He goes incognito as a beggar among beggars, as an outcast, among the outcast, despairing among the despairing, and dying among the dying."

Contrary to our view that God must be among the wealthy and the powerful, we find that Christ makes a most amazing statement; "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it me." Verse 40

Jesus is among the little folk, the people we so easily overlook. There he is, among the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, those sick in mind and in body, the prisoners. Wherever people are suffering and oppressed, there is Christ.

We might wish Jesus to be somewhere else, a place that's more respectable, you know, a place that is not so uncomfortable, an environment that's more affluent and pleasing.

But Jesus is there, were He has ever been, on the cross. He is suffering with those who suffer, and dying with those who are dying, and wandering in search of a home with the homeless, sick and in prison with those who are being tortured.

He, who was himself poor, makes His dwelling among His people, the poor of the earth. Christ Jesus, was born into this world, not among the wealthy or the elite of the world, but among the poorest of the poor.

Christ Jesus was born in a feeding trough for farm animals, He lived in poverty, worked in poverty, and began His public ministry wandering as one without a home, teaching love and doing good.

The only reward He received was to be wrongfully convicted and to die as a common criminal upon a Roman cross, upon a trash heap outside of the City of Jerusalem, He died a shameful, and painful death, as the lowest of the low.

Christ Jesus still suffers with those whose only crime, is that they were born. Their only offense is that they desire to live in peace, and to raise their families like you and I, work everyday so as to put food on the table, to put a roof over their head, and to put clothes on their back.

These little folk are so despised and rejected by the world, that they must live as strangers and aliens without a home.

These are the ones for whom Christ has prepared a home, for they are His family, His brothers and sisters, since He is so intimately identifies Himself with them. Jesus said: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Verse 40

*Second, What is to be our response to Christ? One way we don't respond is to ignore Christ. We certainly would not, nor could we ignore His presence, as Christ sits to judge the whole world.

Why should we ignore His presence with us in humility in the poor, the suffering and marginalized?

It's interesting to observe in our passage that Christ judges the nations. We all know that we shall stand before Christ in the last judgment as individuals, but, do we realize, that Christ will also judge the nations?

Is our nation responding to Christ, by responding to the poor, the needy, and those on the fringes of society with whom He so closely identified?

Have we been concerned enough as a nation with responding to the needs of the hungry, the homeless, the naked, those who are sick and those shackled in prisons?

I wonder how would our nation fare under the standard of Christ's judgment? What a difference it would make in the world as well as our nation, if instead, of predicating our economic and foreign policies on self-interest, we predicated our national policies upon love and concern for our poorer neighbors?

Some years ago, there was a cover article on the front of a major magazine, which had written in red, bold letters with a black background, "GREED: The New Motivating Factor". This lengthy article spoke about how the major interest among many young persons today, and that is, to make as much money as one possibly can, with no concern for anyone else.

This greed is unabashed and unashamed; it makes no apology for its lust for wealth. It is sad to say, that it seems the predominant ethic of our society is a form of Social Darwinism.

If you will remember from your history classes in school, a fellow by the name of Charles Darwin, propagated the theory of evolution. Social Darwinism, is little more than evolutionary theory applied to economics.

In this case, survival of the fittest simply means, that makes it right. Only the strong should survive. We should not be the least concerned about the weak or the suffering.

To help the poor and the helpless, is to resist the laws of nature, most notably, self-preservation. Such is the teaching and perspective of the world.

But Christ appeared in a different way. With whom did Christ associate Himself? Was it with the rich and powerful? No.

Was Christ a close friend with Herod or Pontius Pilate? Did He try to please the religious teachers and influential lawyers of His day? No.

The scripture tells us, that it was not the well respected and powerful that Christ came to, but to the poor and the rejected.

Christ Jesus associated with harlots and swindlers, with uneducated fishermen, and even a couple of political subversives.

Christ Jesus spoke with Samaritan half-breeds, healed gentiles who were considered dogs by the Israelites, healed and taught the poor and the ignorant, and even promised paradise to a condemned criminal on the cross.

Christ Jesus identified himself with the refuse of the world with all those were rejected and discarded. He associated Himself with the poor and the despised in His life and ministry, remember in John's Gospel where Jesus identified Himself as a shepherd?

Christ is present with us today, among the same people, as the incognito one, in the guise of the poor. But what is to be our response to the incognito Christ?

What our scripture text is calling us to, is not simply charity, but justice. Our gospel narrative for today, is a call to work and to live from a Kingdom perspective.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is calling us to see with the perspective and the concerns of the poor in mind. If Christ Himself identifies with the poor, where else should we, His disciples be?

Should we not, be at work with our Lord and Savior, laboring where He is present, strengthening those who are weak, bringing comfort to the comfortless, and working for justice, for those who suffer injustice?

Where else should we be, but with Christ, the same Christ, who reveals God's strength in His weakness.

I think Mother Teresa of Calcutta expresses it best, when she says: "In the eucharist I see Christ in the appearance of bread. In the slums, I see Christ in the distressing disguise of the poor. The Eucharist and the poor are but one love for me. Only in heaven will we see how much we owe to the poor for helping us to love God better because of them."

*Third. But why is Christ's presence in the poor, good news for us? The answer to that question can again be found in our gospel narrative for today.

Notice what the righteous reply to Christ the Judge in verse 37: "Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

They are completely unaware of any good works that they have done for Christ. The one who is vindicated by the judge, is the one unaware of having performed any good works.

Faith knows of no good works. Faith acts out of love. Faith responds to God's initial love. Faith does not act out of obligation, or much worse, guilt.

Faith acts in response to love. Our justification, does not rely upon our good works, but rather in response to Christ Jesus.

It is in responding to the poor, that we respond to Christ Jesus, who is Himself incognito in the poor.

It is the good news of this gospel narrative, that our own liberation can be found by living in solidarity with the poor, the down-trodden and the suffering.

This is, good news for us, because doesn't intend for us to live as unloving, uncaring, indifferent and complacent people.

God's will for us, is that we would become His agents of love and justice, in a world that is filled with hate and injustice.

Christ comes incognito to free us, to become more like Him, through our life of faith, taking a stand with the poor, and the oppressed.

As I close out the message for today, I will leave you with these words from Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a medical doctor, a theologian and a devout Lutheran who said: "He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men, who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow Me' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is." Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, When your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord returns to this world in power and glory, may He find us ready, may He find us faithful, and may He find us utilizing our faith to take care of the least of these, our neighbors, our brothers and sisters who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, and those who are suffering in captivity. By your grace O'God, through the power of your Holy Spirit, strengthen and affirm our faith, help us to see Christ in the least of these, and to do what you have called us to do, as disciples of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. All these things we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.