

"For the Least of These"

Matthew 25:30-46

November 23, 2008

I have to tell you that there are times when I would rather preach on just about anything except the scriptures appointed for a particular day. Certainly there are some good things in these scriptures that could provide an acceptable direction for preaching. It can be a beautiful thing to talk about a God who is so concerned about His creation that He will never abandon us - a God who will shepherd us and provide for us. It is an incredible image in that first lesson for today but if I talk about that I have to go on to talk about the rest of that scripture that talks about how we push each other around - butting each other because we want everything - we want what we want when we want it. And because of the way we live, there will be a judgement to face. I don't like that part so much. The second lesson is great - but I have a hard time getting my 'head' around it. There are words of thankfulness over the faith of the people - but there is also a call to having the 'eyes of the heart' enlightened as though we are not seeing all that God wants us to see. And, of course there is the Gospel text. It holds incredible images of hope and judgement. Yes, I want the words of hope and blessing - "Come you blessed by the Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." I would be hard pressed to find more beautiful words in all of scripture - - but in many ways they only provide a context in the story for the words of judgement that follow. And too often it seems that the hope is quickly lost in the scenes of judgement. Frankly, I just don't want to hear any more discouraging words. I just want to be lifted - encouraged - told that everything is going to be alright. I don't want to hear about fat sheep pushing around the lean sheep - I don't want to have to work to have the eyes of my heart enlightened - I really don't want to hear "Depart from me into the eternal fire"

After all, it is Christ the King Sunday and Thanksgiving is just a few days away - why should there be anything discouraging in our world. We should celebrate the victories of our God who has put all things under the feet of Jesus the Christ. Christ is king - it is a done deal - we really should not worry about anything. - So we celebrate. And beyond the church celebration, we prepare for the feast that will come on Thursday - often renamed to 'turkey day' to emphasis what is really central in the minds of many people - a turkey feast and not a day of deep thanksgiving. It is a great annual gathering of family and friends that calls for more food than we could possibly eat. It is good stuff - Christ the King ... Thanksgiving. Wonderful and appropriate thought on which to focus yet I find myself confronted with other images - images that are a part of our scriptures and

that are also a part of our world.

It was interesting that as I was considering these thoughts I ran across an article that began with a simple date and dramatic headline. "October 1917: The Russian Revolution is born. Human history takes a new direction." The story went on to say that during that very month the Russian Church was assembled in council in the midst of heated debate. It seemed that all of the passionate debate centered around the color of the surplice to be used in liturgical functions. Some insisted vehemently that it had to be white. Others, with equal vehemence, that it had to be purple. Outside of the meeting the world was changing - a change that would effect the Russian Church as much or more than anyone else. Yet they were content to argue about liturgical colors. The article ended by saying: "Coming to grips with a revolution is more of a bother than organizing a liturgy. I'd rather say my prayers than get involved in neighborhood disputes."

It truly is a lot easier to deal with baking a turkey and watching a bit of football than to face the harsh reality of our world. Of course we must gather for Thanksgiving. We must pause to remember and worship Christ the King but we live in a world neighborhood that is crying out in need. Will we respond?

The famous American editor, Horace Greeley, told of receiving a letter from a woman who wrote: "Our church is in dire financial straits. We've tried everything to keep it going: a strawberry festival, an oyster supper, a donkey party, a turkey dinner, and, finally, a box social. Will you please tell us, Dr. Greeley, how to keep our struggling church from disbanding?" Dr. Greeley wrote back to her a message in two words: "Try Christianity!"

The teaching parables of Jesus are profound and sometimes disturbing. Today's parable of judgement finds God separating the sheep from the goats. I suspect that we might try to divert attention from the final judgement by saying that some people are sheep and some, by no fault of their own, are goats. But if we did that we would be missing the point. After the separation takes place, the question of why is raised. Why am I at the right hand ... or the left. And though it is hard for us to deal with as we try to keep our focus on the total unmerited grace of God, still it is clear that this judgement has to do with our response to the world around us.

I was hungry, thirsty, naked or imprisoned - either you saw my situation and responded or you failed to even notice or care enough to respond. Somehow in the response to the needs of the 'least of these' we find God speaking "Come you blessed" or "Depart from me you accursed ..."

I really liked the response of Horace Greeley to the request for advice on keeping the church alive. When he advised that they 'try Christianity' I

smiled. Certainly they believed in the midst of all of their turkey dinners and box socials they must have believed that they were doing what God was calling them to do. Of course we are called to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christ the King [and even have the right color paraments]. But lets not miss the revolution going on outside our door - don't let us miss the hungry and the thirsty, the homeless and the ones who are out of work. We are so blessed to live in such a stable environment - it is not so in many parts of our country and world in these days. We have so much for which to be thankful.

I read a great story about Joshua Bell, who was renowned virtuoso violinist. One Friday in January 2007 he went to the subway and took out his 1713 Stradivarius violin, laid out his violin case with some spare change in it and began to play. Tickets for his concert 3 days earlier ranged from \$100 - \$200 - now he played for all that passed by. What was amazing was that even though he played for 43 minutes, almost no one out of the thousands of people who passed by even paused to notice him. In that 43 minutes, 27 people did slow down enough to toss \$32 in change into his open violin case. Perhaps that's not bad for 43 minutes perhaps we just don't notice the needs in the world around us as we concern ourselves with vestment colors and turkey dinners.

Oh, how we are blessed. Let us pray together that our eyes might be open to the least of God's children that we might respond to their need. **AMEN**