

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 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?' And the king will answer them, '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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Sunday after Sunday we sing hymns, pray prayers and read scripture that tells us that the only thing of ultimate importance is our relationship with God. There's nothing like a recession to test whether or not we believe that. A major point of this text is, can I feel compassion for the poor when my net worth is declining? If this is a time for cinching the belt tighter then my charitable giving will have to be cut! How can I plan for the future and support the many worthy causes that I know exist, including perhaps Christ & Holy Trinity and IHA, when I'm not worth as much today as I was on January 1, much less January 1 of 2007! I know that, as a fundraiser, I am very nervous about how much money we'll raise between now and January 1, 2009. For IHA this is the critical period. Over half of our donations from individuals come to us in the next four or five weeks. If people are making cuts we fear that discretionary giving, charitable giving, will be one of the first places people cut. I was on a panel recently to speak about the Economic Crisis and nonprofit mission. I summarized my fears by saying that we are in a crisis of confidence. At the very moment when the need for what IHA does is escalating, the donors who make it possible are facing tough decisions. Will they, will you, decide to support us generously as they, as you, have done in the past? That is my anxiety. I have watched the value of my investments plummet. I know the pain. What can we do?

So a text like this one asks us pointedly what is really and truly important and are we focused on what is really and truly important and if we are focused on it what is the outcome of that focus? How do we, speaking in a time of diminished resources, respond to the radical call to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison?

This is also the text I always cite when people ask me why I do what I do. I feel particularly blessed to be able to work with the Least of These because I firmly believe that Our Lord says that there are two ways we can be certain we are encountering him. The first is through the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ at the Eucharist and the second is through working with the poor.

The text is an interesting one. If this were a class and not a sermon I'd enjoy leading you through the way Jesus uses sheep and shepherd imagery in Matthew. He refers to the image frequently and while this reading, from what we call the Matthean Apocalypse, appears to be very startling in its clarity, if we look at the usage of the metaphor for sheep in Matthew it is not so startling. But to focus on the use of sheep in Matthew would distract us from the

radical call of this Gospel to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the sick and those who are in prison.

I've heard sermons preached on this text that make much of the distinction between goats and sheep. The goats are on the sinister side of things and some preachers have said that this is because goats are less pure than sheep. It is unlikely that Jesus was making that point. All evidence points to sheep and goats being herded together, but they needed to be separated when it was very cold because the goats need shelter and the sheep can tolerate colder temperatures. If Jesus was calling attention to a need to care for something he would've reversed the image. There is every indication that his contemporary shepherds would've cared equally for and about both animals. So focusing on sheep vs. goats also distracts us from the radical call to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison

It is interesting what Jesus doesn't say in the Gospels. He doesn't say that voting the right way insures that we will encounter him. He doesn't say that being an Episcopalian, or even a Christian, insures that we will encounter him. He doesn't say that having the right laws or moral code, except the code to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison, means we will encounter him. In other words, he doesn't say that anything we really care about is important unless we are faithful in feeding the hungry, providing drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger clothing the naked and visiting those who are sick and in prison.

This text doesn't even draw a distinction between the quality of life of those on the right and left hand. The goats may have the right theology of nearly everything. They may be more faithful in their patriotism, devotion to family, support of the economy and upholders of civic virtue, however they are judged and removed from the presence of Our Lord and Savior because they do not feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison.

I don't think Jesus is intending to make life difficult for us. He isn't saying that there is anything wrong with being patriotic, holding public office, caring for one's family, succeeding in business or profession and defending civic virtue. What he is saying is that apart from caring for the poor, apart from being certain that one feeds the hungry, provides drink to the thirsty, welcomes the stranger, clothes the naked and visits those who are sick and in prison, all else makes for a better life but does not lead to salvation. He wants to be both clear and simple in saying this.

Jesus is also not drawing a conclusion about the virtue of poverty. He isn't saying that the poor are more righteous than the rich. He isn't saying that they are more likely to be saved than the rich, or the middle class, he is simply saying that the sine qua non for salvation is how we feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison. Jesus is saying that we are called to be radically hospitable.

This means that we care for the deserving and the undeserving poor. Tonight, for instance, unless it goes below 20°F or there is snow or rain, there will be two people sleeping at the Levitt, a man sleeping in the bus shelter on Kings Highway and a woman sleeping in Baron's South. How do we care for them in this radical fashion? The programs of IHA are there for them but neither we nor the town nor the police department can force them to use any of our services. All four of them are with us during the day. They eat in the Community Kitchen. They bathe at the Gillespie Center. We talk with them. But none of them want to be inside at night, at least not inside a space they have to share with others. We are powerless to force them inside unless they are deemed to be in immediate danger. Below 20 we deem them in danger of dying and force them to accept shelter or be arrested.

In addition there are another five or six people who will sleep in their cars in Westport. Some in the commuter lot on the Connector, some behind the police station and some in the Imperial Avenue lot. There is at least one woman who frequently sleeps either here, at Saugatuck or at Greens Farms Church. How do we take seriously the

command to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison and tolerate people living in these conditions?

I don't know and I'm probably the person who knows more about homelessness than anyone else you will encounter today. I know that they would accept housing if it came with no strings. If they could drink and still be housed, use drugs and still be housed, not take medications and still be housed, then they would, for the most part, accept housing. But we don't have that type of housing. It's called Harm Reduction Housing and we need it but I don't see us getting it.

In the interim, and it's proving to be a very long interim, you and I can at least be certain that they eat, drink something healthy, have clothes and live in community. The Gillespie Center and the Bacharach Community provide them with community. We want to do more but we don't have the resources.

I say many things about why we do the work we do and one of the things I say frequently is that we provide family for people who have lost theirs. Tonight between 55 and 60 people will be sheltered or housed in an IHA program. We can only do that if you take seriously the heart of today's Gospel reading to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison.

We don't accomplish our mission perfectly. If we did there would not be so many people night after night refusing shelter. But we work to be present for everyone in every way we can. By participating in our mission, and this congregation has adopted us at the focus of its mission, you are on the way to meeting the command to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those who are sick and in prison. But it is a process not something accomplished once and for all. So I am nervous as I enter the year-end. With all my faith and heart I believe that you and I can encounter Jesus when we minister to the Least of These. Having that as the standard for what is acceptable is what distinguishes the church from a civic club. We are, quite simply, called to heal the world.

Christ the King, the current title for this Sunday sets the metaphor for King on its ear. We find our King among the least. He is easy to approach. I pray that you will find him there too. The work I do is a great blessing to me and I hope it will be a blessing to you, as it becomes, in whatever way it can for you, the work you do.