

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 11/20/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Christ the King Sunday – Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Our theme is Christ the King. Throughout the year, in our lectionary texts, in our hymns, and in our collects of the day, our tradition gives us the opportunity to recognize and acknowledge Jesus as teacher, as healer, as prophet, as redeemer. Today, we're asked to consider Christ as king, ruler of the world, judge of all that is, has been, and will be.

The picture painted in the Gospel according to Matthew, which we've just heard, is both thrilling and sobering. "The Son of Man will come 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 ..."

This passage can give us nightmares. We can relate to the Jesus who is healer, teacher, and friend of the oppressed. We're drawn to the one who, himself, has suffered. But this Son of Man condemning some to eternal life and some to eternal punishment may well terrify us. As with the other passages from Matthew that we've heard over the last few weeks, this one grabs our attention. Our complacency is shaken; we're fully engaged. And once he has our undivided attention, what is it that Matthew is trying to say?

It seems to me that the core of Matthew's message is that we don't have all the time in the world to fool around with our lives. The day is coming when we will be called to account for how we've spent the gift of our time on this earth, and how we've used the resources with which we've been abundantly blessed. We don't know how and when the world will come to an end or when our individual lives will be over. We tend to fantasize that there will always be a tomorrow when we can start that to which God is clearly calling us. Matthew seems to be asking, "What if today is it? What if we came face to face with Christ right now and were asked to justify how we've lived?"

Matthew also seems to be saying that we may have the wrong idea about what would be pleasing to Christ in that conversation. In Matthew's account, the One seated on the throne of judgment doesn't say anything about advanced education, stellar careers, financial security, or social standing in the community. He doesn't even say anything about beautiful liturgy, profound sermons, or astounding church growth. He doesn't mention unwavering faith or correct doctrine. Instead, he talks about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, and visiting those in prison. Basic acts of human compassion are what count in the kingdom of God.

And, in this strange text from Matthew, we're invited to behold a secret of the kingdom of God. While we will be held accountable for living a life centered on acts of compassion, it is in those very acts of compassion that we will come face to face with Christ. It's one thing to know that in loving our neighbor, we're serving Christ. It's quite another to realize that in loving our neighbor, we're actually meeting Christ.

This isn't to say that we can't and won't meet Christ elsewhere. Of course we meet Christ in the beauty of liturgy and music, in art and architecture. We meet Christ in silence, in meditation, and in nature. But those tend to be the occasional transcendent experiences, when we're unexpectedly filled with the presence and the reality of God in a way that uplifts us, comforts us, strengthens us, or calms us. We do need those experiences to feel connected to God.

But being connected to God also involves experiences that drain us, and challenge us, and overwhelm us. Life in God isn't intended to be a perpetual spiritual high or a sea of tranquility far removed from the chaos in which our world finds itself. Life in God is recognizing the suffering right in front of us and doing something to alleviate that suffering. It's not glamorous; it's not even necessarily fulfilling. It will often feel like what we're doing is so little in the scheme of things that it makes absolutely no difference. But, according to Matthew, this is what makes all the difference. At the end of our lives, what matters is not how many mountain-top experiences we've had in which we've felt the love and the presence of God. What matters is meeting Christ in the lives of those in need whom we've served.

I believe that there is no one who understood this better than Dorothy Day. She died in 1980, at the age of 83, having co-founded, overseen, and lived out the mission of The Catholic Worker – a movement committed to embodying Jesus' gospel of radical love through voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, the hungry, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Robert Ellsberg, our preacher last weekend, and a friend and biographer of Dorothy Day has written:

The "spirituality" of Dorothy Day was based on an effort to encounter Christ in our daily lives. He was present in our everyday situations, in the choices we made, in...the sacrament of the present moment." He was present, too, in the people around us, especially under the aspect of their needs, the needs of those most weak and vulnerable.

She did not expect great things to happen overnight. She knew the slow pace, one foot at a time, by which change comes and new life comes. It was, in the phrase she repeated often, "by little and by little" that we are saved.

... Dorothy learned that any act of love might contribute to the balance of love in the world, any suffering endured in love might ease the burden of others; such was the mysterious bond within the Body of Christ. We could only make use of the little things we possessed – the little faith, the little strength, the little courage. These were the loaves and fishes. We could only offer what we had, and pray that God would make the increase

...

The righteous will answer the king, '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 ... you did it to me.' Amen.