

Last Pentecost, Yr. A  
November 26, 2017  
Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25: 31-46

In one of his classes about how we are (or are not) rational thinkers, Roger used a one-liner to describe one of the traps we fall into. That line is WHAT YOU SEE IS ALL THERE IS. And that line seems a good one to use to talk about today's scriptures on this final Sunday of this liturgical year, Christ the King Sunday. We've been hearing end-of-time scriptures now for several weeks and this is the final one, reminding us that, at some point, Christ, who has been king over all creation from the beginning, will make that truth explicit. AS C.S. Lewis once put it: at some point, the author will walk on to the stage and the play will be over.

We don't always see that kingship – we see instead all the stuff of the world battling to establish ITS predominance, or people, like those fat sheep in the Ezekiel reading, jostling and pushing in order to grab some kind of power for themselves. It often doesn't look like this is God's Kingdom – but faith reminds us that there's something else going on – God establishing his kingdom through Christ. It may not look like it, but faith says that it is indeed so. It is NOT the case that what we see is all there is!

Maybe we miss that kingship because we're not seeing clearly or because we're looking for the wrong things. In the collect, we pray that God will restore all things in Christ and we pray further that all of us, who are divided and enslaved by sin, will be freed and brought together under God's rule. Reconciliation, healing of division – those aren't things we ordinarily associate with kingship and power. So our lack of understanding is part of the problem.

In the Ephesians reading, Paul prays that his listeners will come to know God, so that with the eyes of their hearts enlightened, they'll GET IT. It's not a victory dance, but a call to live a life worthy of the one who called them (and us, as well) to be on the "winning team" - to understand that all the world is being brought together under the power of God in Christ, whether we see it or not. Robert Capon compares the kingdom to an iceberg – at best we see 10% of it, as it occasionally becomes visible at certain moments in history; but at the end, we'll see all of it – there will no longer be the 90% beneath the surface.

And then there's the reading from Matthew. Someone has pointed out that Matthew talks a lot about judgment – that he's much more strident than the other gospel writers. That may be true because he was writing when his world was a mess. We've talked before about that time: the temple has been destroyed, Rabbinic Judaism is all that's left of the Jewish traditions and the Jewish Christians are being kicked out of the synagogues. Matthew himself was Jewish and he has that same strong emphasis on ethical living. You'll remember the beatitudes and what often seem like impossible demands for a Christian life. He wants to impress upon his readers that belief without action, mouthing the words without living a transformed life, isn't going to cut it. As we've said recently, faith and works are two sides of the same coin.

If we look carefully at the passage we heard this morning, I think there are four things that stand out: the need for those good works, the fact that to do those works for "the least" is to do them for Christ, the fact that everyone, sheep and goats alike, miss the point – none of them saw

Christ in those they served and, finally, there's that bit about judgment and separation, reward and punishment. I suspect that most of us go immediately to the judgment and punishment part. But it helps to put that in perspective if we remember that Matthew was written in that intertestamental period when apocalyptic literature was prevalent and it also helps to remember that these themes of separation, in this case, the sheep and goats, and judgment and salvation were often used in the Jewish tradition. This business of heaven and hell, or salvation and damnation, however, certainly does grab our attention. But the question is whether it should. N.T. Wright, the Anglican biblical scholar, points out that Heaven and Hell (and the more personal question of whether I'll get to heaven) are not really concerns in the Bible. John Calvin, in his almost 1500 pages of theology, has just 2 paragraphs about heaven and 1 paragraph about Hell. We can get derailed if we get stuck on that WILL I GO TO HEAVEN question. We'll all face that at some point, but the central question for us now is not what happens at the end, but rather, WHAT SHOULD I BE DOING RIGHT NOW?

I'd like to say a couple more things about this. Undoubtedly Matthew was trying to make a strong point but I don't think you would disagree when I say that he's painting a pretty black and white picture that isn't very realistic, because if the truth be told, none of us is totally "SHEEP" and none of us is totally "GOAT." We're all a mixture. There's a story about a minister talking to Sunday school kids. "OK," he says, if all the good people are white and all the bad people are black, what color are you?" And one of them answers, "I'm STREAKY!" Out of the mouths of babes – we're ALL streaky. We're all a mixture, we're all in the process of becoming those kingdom people God has called us to be. But we're not there yet. So, when we're faced with that other challenge in today's Gospel, that one about seeing the face of Christ in every person, and loving each person because God loves them, it's indeed a challenge. We may all want to get one of those bumper stickers that say, GOD LOVES YOU AND I'M TRYING!

So with that, let's look more closely at the Matthew reading. You'll note that it's not just the goat people who missed the fact that Christ would be found in the suffering – everybody missed that. Matthew's point is undoubtedly the straightforward one – take care of the suffering because Christ has identified himself with them. But I think there's another point as well. How do we get ourselves to that point where we can see God, not just in suffering people, but everywhere? I remember when I was in seminary there were a couple of "Jesus-sightings" – one was when someone saw the face of Christ in an enchilada and another was when another person saw that same face in the bark of a tree. I don't think that's the direction we're supposed to go in, however.

So, how do we go about getting to that place where we're able to see the face of Christ in one another? I remember, when Bishop Jacobus was with us, that he had a picture in his office – probably 2' by 3' – it was a picture of the face of Christ, but when you looked more closely, you could see that the entire thing was made up of small pictures of humans. All of us, together, making up the body of Christ.

Finding Christ everywhere – I think the first thing is that we have to be looking. I was recently in a conversation about whether there were angels or not and I pointed out that the Hebrew word for 'angel' is messenger and that perhaps we've all been visited by messengers from God,

whether we recognize them or not – a friend or a stranger says something, we get a sudden inspiration. I told the story of being in Seattle visiting a friend and deciding to walk downtown to a coffee shop. As I was walking along, a fellow fell into step beside me and we struck up a conversation. Turned out he was homeless and was raising money by selling braided bracelets that he was making and, of course, he wanted to know if I'd like one. We walked and talked for quite some distance, with him filling me in on some of the details of being homeless, like his dislike of church soup kitchens because they made it seem like prayer was a price for the meal, or his suggestion that, when homeless, it was always a good idea to sleep in the better neighborhoods. And then he wanted to know about me. It was when I was trying to discern what God was calling me to do and I told him about that. By this time, we were downtown and he turned to me and asked, "Do you really believe all that stuff about loving God and loving your neighbor?" And, I said, yes, that I did. He looked directly at me then and said, "Then go for it." He walked away and when I turned to look, I couldn't find him. An angel? Perhaps. Someone with the face of Christ? For sure.

It's getting close to Christmas and one of the joys of this time of year are the stories. So let me close with a classic written by Leo Tolstoy. It's about Martin, a Russian cobbler who, one night when he's reading the Bible, hears Jesus say, "Martin, look out into the street tomorrow, for I shall come." So the next day, he prepared his tea and porridge and cabbage soup and kept a watch out on the street. First he sees the old street sweeper who seems too tired and weak to stand, let alone clear the snow. So Martin invites him in to warm himself and have some tea. And then he sees a young woman trying to warm her baby with her own thin and shabby garments and he asks her in and gives her some of his soup and a warm cloak. Then he sees a young boy stealing an apple from an old grandmother who is selling them and he mediates between them so successfully that the boy ends up helping the grandmother carry her sack. And all the while he keeps looking out the window, waiting, but Christ doesn't appear. When the day is over and he takes the Bible down once more, he hears a voice saying, "Martin, Martin, don't you know me?" And then, one by one, he sees the people he met during the day, each of them smiling and saying, "It is I."

Remember the saying – we walk by faith and not by sight. We probably won't physically see the face of Christ in others, but, through faith, we can trust that he is there, not only with the suffering, but in all creation, walking with us, day by day, hour by hour, loving us into life. Our call as Christians is to do the same, showing that loving face of God in our everyday lives. God is counting on us. Amen.