Sermon November 26, 2017

“Christ the King” Sunday

Matthew 25:31-46

So here we are at the last reading in our 2017 trip through the Gospel of Matthew. Whew, it’s been quite a ride with him! I have to say I won’t really miss his favorite saying, which was some version of:

“Throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Today we finish our journey through the life of Jesus with Matthew as our guide, as we come to the end of the liturgical year.

Each year, the church year begins with the advent of Christ’s birth and ends with the advent of the second coming of Christ into the world. With Advent upon us starting next Sunday, we reflect today on a second Advent – the coming of Christ as king.

It’s a tidy way of looking at the life of Christ within the framework of a year’s time.

You know, as a child I thought all of Christ’s life on earth happened in a year. I really thought that’s why he was so special, going from baby to adult in one year’s time. And in my defense, as I look back at my thinking that way, it kind of makes sense to me because each Sunday I heard about his life in small bits and pieces over a year’s time – beginning with Christmas and ending with Easter.

Of course, that way of thinking sounds foolish.

I believe there is a kernel of truth though in thinking that it is easy to hear these stories and lose our sense when events took place. Scholars tell us Jesus’ ministry was over a span of about three years. Yet when I immerse myself in each chapter, no matter who is the author, I find I’m not so much interested in the linear movement of events in time as I am with the stories themselves.

Now I realize many theologians have spend their life’s work researching the meaning of when these events occurred and how they related to each other and to the outside world. I have great respect for their work.

But to be honest, I find the stories about Jesus’ life are more engrossing when taken as unique episodes. While each gospel writer’s version has a special way of pointing to the future, I find myself entering each passage as if it were a stand-alone narrative that has its own immediacy and relevance. I get lost in what the characters say to each other, how they react to what’s going on around them, and I think about how I would have reacted if I had been in their place.

There’s a Benedictine method of spiritual meditation called Lectio Divina where you read a passage of gospel text and then picture yourself as one of the characters in the story, for example you are a bystander watching events unfold. It is a powerful way of meditating on God’s word that invites us to use all your senses to be fully present in the story.

And I find one of the most difficult stories to enter is that of meditating on Christ’s second coming. In our reading from Matthew today it’s quite clear there will be a reckoning, an apocalypse.

It’s like a reverse Lectio Divina. Where instead of reading the text and imagining yourself as a character in the story, the text **is** the story of **your** life. Where Matthew invites us to review our life this past year and think about how we treated those near to us.

According to Matthew, when Christ comes again His concern will be to find who took care of the least of His people. And more importantly, why did we not recognize those who needed care? What prevented us for seeing the needs of others?

This passage comes at the end of Matthews gospel for a reason – he asks us to really think about areas where we dropped the ball, so that we can be do better in the coming year.

There’s still time for us to change, in small ways, day-to-day. No one gets a pass on this work, but there is one consolation – that is in knowing we are doing this work together.

In the end, that’s what it’s about, being a community of faith who works together to make the world a better place. And to do that work we need to work on ourselves first. Or in Matthew’s terms – we need to do the best we can to stop being goats.

My prayer for you on this Christ the King Sunday is that you take time to reflect over the past year. And when you do, be gentle with yourself. Treat yourself with compassion. For that’s how we learn how to take care of the least of those among us, by first taking care of ourselves.

Then who knows, maybe you’ll find yourself next year living amongst the sheep – or at least moving in that direction.

Amen.