

Ezekiel 34: 11-24  
Ephesians 1: 15-23  
Matthew 25: 31-46

Hungry King Jesus  
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Once again, the Gospel writer Matthew is clobbering us over the head with talk of judgment. Today's parable is the last in a series, and each one seems to revolve around whether you are in or out. A couple of weeks ago: "Did you invest your talent well?" Because if you didn't, you will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Before that: "Did you bring extra oil for your lamp, in case the bridegroom was late?" Because, if you didn't, the bridegroom is going to lock you out of the party. And before that, "Did you wear the right wedding garment to the banquet?" Because, if you didn't, guess what? You will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Again.

The natural tendency of fearful believers is to get really focused on all this punishment. In today's parable, it's called, "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" and "eternal punishment." That's bad enough to make us sit up and listen. It may even be bad enough for us to create a mental image or structure where the cosmos revolves around our most fearful imaginings. The history writer Jon Sweeney has pointed out that our Christian notion of hell largely comes from these several unfortunate metaphors in Matthew's Gospel. Hell is not found in the first five books of the Bible, the Torah. It's not found in the Gospel of John or in Paul's letters. The words Sheol and Gehenna are used in Matthew, but they have nothing to do with the later medieval notion of eternal punishment. Sheol is simply the place of the dead, a sort of limbo place where humans await the final judgment when God will finally win, so everyone will win. Gehenna, an obvious metaphor, was the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem which became an early Jewish metaphor for evil. The idea of hell as we most commonly view it came much more from Dante's Divine Comedy: brilliant Italian poetry, but bad Christian theology.

When Jesus told parables, he liked to use the Hebrew idiom of extreme contrast to get his listeners' attention. This was especially true when he spoke about issues people normally wanted to avoid, like social justice, compassion, empathy. He is saying that these things have ultimate significance, they require decision, they can be deal-breakers, so to speak. So listen *hard*. There is a moral correspondence between what we do to the least of the brothers and sisters and what we do to honor Christ. This is good news on one level, but it is hard news, costly news.

This teaching poses questions, but they are less about what happens at the end of all things, and more about what we should be doing now. Reverence for Jesus as Messiah, as Son of Man, and the one sitting on the throne is not a matter for tomorrow; it's a matter for today.

Once again, over the centuries the church has created images that can distract us from the urgent business at hand. Today is sometimes called Christ the King Sunday. And there are so many paintings and other images of Christ as king, or Christ in majesty, as the one on the throne, or as *Pantocrator* as they say in the Eastern Orthodox churches. In some of them, the figure of Christ is actually separating groups of sheep and goats. In some of them, the figure of Jesus looks like an actual king, with fine robes and a crown and a powerful presence. There is a mosaic in the apse of

the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC, an enormous thing, that shows a youthful, blond, blue-eyed Jesus wearing a red toga with one shoulder, arm, and part of his chest exposed. And let me tell you, this guy works out! He looks like he was never hungry or thirsty or sick or imprisoned. In short, he looks like a 20<sup>th</sup> century person of privilege. Awe-inspiring, maybe, but not the Jesus of Matthew's 25<sup>th</sup> chapter. For that you would have to go to Stefan Lochner's 15<sup>th</sup> century Last Judgment, which shows all of Jesus' torso with the ribs standing out, and the wound on his chest, and his poor hurt hands. For that you would have to go to the Isenheim altarpiece, where Grunewald shows the crucified Christ as suffering from the plague and some pretty bad skin condition. When you do that, you get to see the suffering of Jesus, and through it, the suffering of God.

Jesus took many of his parable metaphors from the Hebrew Scriptures, and this sheep and goat picture is found in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. This is God speaking, and saying that he will have to intervene as a divine shepherd because the human shepherds have forgotten their duty. The divine shepherd has a particular concern for the lost and vulnerable and sick and starving. Their pain causes God pain. But, remember, God's pain and the pain of the vulnerable are not an accident; the actions and omissions of the well-fed "sheep" contribute to the hurt of the vulnerable. The anger and the tenderness of the divine shepherd are all mixed up together. This is what the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel called an image of divine pathos. He wrote:

"Justice is not important for its own sake; the validity of justice and the motivation for its exercise lie in the blessings it brings to humans. For justice... is not an abstraction, a value. Justice exists in relation to a person, and is something done by a person. An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt. What is the image of a person? A person is a being whose anguish may reach the heart of God.... God "is encountered not as universal, general, pure Being, but always in a particular mode of being, as personal God to a personal human, in a specific pathos that comes with a demand in a concrete situation."

Here we find Jesus calling to us in this parable, with an anguished demand to open our eyes to the particular. If we want to worship Jesus as the one on the throne, it can only be done by seeing the hungry Jesus, and the thirsty Jesus, and the stranger Jesus, and the naked Jesus, and the Jesus languishing in prison. And today, I would ask, though it is not strictly scriptural: Can we see Jesus in those who are sexually harassed and abused? Should we add the sentence, "I was tormented by harassment and you believed me?" If we gaze only at images of judgment and damnation, or, alternatively, if we gaze only at images of the triumphant strong man, we will not see what is in front of us today. Remember that those sheep did not realize that they had seen Christ the King. They just saw people who needed to be fed, or protected, or visited, or respected. They just saw people and treated them like... people. They didn't actually know that they were, or that they should be, looking for God. And yet they are called to inherit the Kingdom.

Jesus is also giving his followers a lifeline in this approach to compassion. Of course we feel overwhelmed by issues like global war and terror, climate change, natural disasters, and epidemics. We do not all sit in places of power, where our voice might make an immediate change. So we are told, start with any and all of those issues, one person at a time. This vision in Matthew 25 is dealing with just such direct acts that touched one person. But don't be surprised if you are transformed and converted by this work into someone who is moved to change the structures that allow hunger, thirst, poverty, discrimination and mass incarceration to take their toll.

At first glance, the passage from Ephesians seems to be living in that metaphorical, other-worldly realm of Christ “seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...above every name that is named...putting all things under his feet.” This sounds like that triumphant, strong man image again, the one that seems to release us from any obligation but to grovel. But wait, Paul writes that the church is “Christ’s body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” What does it mean for the church to share Christ’s body and to be animated by God’s power? Maybe we are thinking too small. Maybe we are living in a scarcity mindset, when God has promised us the “riches of a glorious inheritance.” The words of Ephesians challenge us to expect great things from ourselves and our congregations and expect great things from God. God has glorious things planned for us, and God’s loving glory inspires us to greater love and commitment - to the body of Christ, our church, to the universal body of Christ, this good earth and to all the ways the broken body of Christ appears to us in our neighbors.

I guess that what I am asking is for you to think small and large at the same time, which may be a way of restating, “there is a moral correspondence between what we do to the least of the brothers and sisters and what we do to honor Christ.” Mother Teresa used to put it another way: “in the poor we meet Jesus in his most distressing disguises.” But she also said that, “The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.”

Here is the Good News: In Christ, God comes to us to illuminate and to heal our pain, our loneliness, our persecutions. Here is the Good News: Christ comes to us in daily life. Here is more Good News: “with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know the hope to which God has called us.”

In hope and in thanksgiving, let us seek and feed the hungry King Jesus. Amen