

November 26, 2023 – Matthew 25:31-46

Today is Christ the King Sunday. The very last Sunday of the church year. Next week, the chancel will be blue with Advent paraments. The Christmas tree will be lit up and covered in chrismon ornaments. Thanksgiving has come and gone and we're all eager to jump into the season of Christmas preparation.

But we're not quite there yet. That's the beginning of the church year. Right now we're at the end. And because we're at the end of the church year it's fitting and traditional that we take a look at the end times. Take a glimpse into our own future when Christ returns as king over heaven and earth.

And there are aspects of it that we all know very well. We know that Christ will judge the living and the dead. We know that those with faith in Christ look forward to eternal life in paradise. And that those without faith can expect punishment in the eternal fire of hell. These are nothing new to most of us, I would hope.

But there's still more that we sometimes miss. Because Christ lays out an especially vivid picture of the end for us in our Gospel lesson today. And there are a few things hidden there that we tend to overlook.

The first thing that many people miss is right there in the first line of the first verse of our reading. "*When the Son of Man comes in His glory.*" When He comes. We say it over and over again in our creeds and confessions. The return of Christ. The second-coming of Christ. And yet, when I talk to people about eternal life, I usually hear something completely different. I usually hear things like, "When I go to be with the Lord... When God takes me to heaven."

And yeah, that's true. God does take us to heaven when we die. But that's not how Jesus talks. What Jesus focuses on is not that we're going there, but that He's coming here. And He's making Himself at home. He is Christ the King, and He's setting up a glorious throne to sit upon, here on earth. He's gathering the nations of the earth to Himself.

And He's doing it, not because He couldn't take us to heaven. But because He doesn't want to. This beautiful earth, right here around us, is our inheritance. Buried underneath layers of sin and evil and suffering, this is the kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the earth. This is the paradise that God always intended for us.

The devil may try to take it from us. Death may try to destroy it. Sin may pollute it into something we can't even recognize as good. But in the end, it will be remade and restored to the kingdom that God always wanted for us. A perfect kingdom, purified of all sin. The kingdom of the righteous, bought and paid for by the Son, not with gold or silver, but with his own precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.

And what of everyone else? Well, that's something else we often miss. Because this world, this inheritance, was designed from the beginning to be a home for us as God's children. It was made by Him, but it was in His will to give it to us. Creation was made for human beings. Human beings were made to live in creation. We belong here. Eden was part of God's plan and it will be part of God's plan once again.

But hell? Hell was actually never intended for unbelievers. There's no mention of sending people to hell in God's original, Genesis plan. Though He certainly had complete foreknowledge of what would happen, He didn't create human beings saying, "Yup... I'm gonna have to send most of these people to hell. Oh well."

No, he created us without sin. He created us without fault or defect. And when we sinned, when we mutilated that perfect image He had created, and when we aligned ourselves with the powers of sin, death, and devil, it was as if God said, "Well... what do I do with you now? This isn't what I intended for you. This isn't what I want for you. But, if you're gonna stand on the devil's side. If you're gonna fight against me in His army. If you're going to embrace his kingdom. Then I guess I have to send you to His prison."

That's what our reading for today says that hell is. "*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*" Hell is a prison for the devil and his angels. And only because we have aligned ourselves with the devil and his angels – only because we reject God's Law and God's Son, just as Satan did – now it's also a prison for sinful, unbelieving humanity.

But why? Why send those on His left to hell? Why offer paradise to those on His right? Is it merely because of their actions? Is it merely because of their good works? Or their failure to do good works?

I mean, that's what this text seems to be saying. Feed the hungry. Invite the lonely. Clothe the naked. Care for the sick. Visit the imprisoned. Do lots of good stuff and God will reward you. Do nothing good for anyone and God will punish you. Easy. Right?

Well, not really. Because that misses something important about what the king says about those good works. You see, the sheep are rewarded for their good works specifically because Christ chooses to see their actions as done for Him. The goats are punished for their lack of good works specifically because Christ chooses to see their inaction as done against Him.

Both groups are absolutely dumbfounded when Jesus tells them that they have done these things for and against Him. The sheep had no idea they were doing anything for the king. The goats had no idea they were doing anything against the king. Because trying to do good works will not get you into heaven. And that surprise just demonstrates all the more that it was never about what they did or how much they did or how good they were that was at stake.

What was at stake was whether or not God chose to give them eternal life. What was at stake was whether the king chose to consider them "you who are blessed" or chose to consider them "you cursed [ones]." What was at stake was whether or not the Son of Man chose to put Himself in their lives, in ways they couldn't see or feel or recognize in any way.

So that, yes, they could do these good things. Things that we ourselves should always try to do. But things that matter, not because of how well we do them, but because we know by faith that God sees them done as if for Christ Himself.

You see, that's what this entire lesson is all about. Looking at the world the way that Christ looks at the world. Looking at humanity the way that Christ looks at humanity. Because he is the king. He is the judge. He is the one deciding how we are each going to be viewed.

And if he wants to, He can absolutely look at us with eyes of judgement. Eyes that see us as the sinners we are. Sinners who would deny the Son of God a cup of water even as He died on a cross. And so are rightly cursed for it and sent to hell with the devil and his angels.

Or He can look at us with eyes of love. Eyes that see us covered in His blood and His righteousness. And so are rightly called "*the righteous.*" Not because of anything we did, but because of what Christ did for us.

Which means that there's really only one question that needs to be answered: which one are you? How can you know if God sees you as a sheep or a goat? How can you know if God will welcome you into his kingdom, or if God will cast you out as a cursed one destined for hell and eternal fire?

That's a question that has plagued Christianity for centuries. And there have been a lot of really terrible answers put forward. Answers like indulgences purchased from the pope. Or continual acts of piety that demonstrate your great faith. Or charismatic gifts and enthusiastic worship that prove the Holy Spirit's presence within you.

But the answer that Jesus gives us is much simpler. He says that those who are welcomed into God's kingdom are those who are "*blessed by [His] Father.*" And there is only one time in Jesus' ministry when we see the blessing of God the Father: at Jesus' baptism. Holy Baptism is the blessing of God the Father. It was a blessing that He gave to his Son at the beginning of his ministry. And it is a blessing that He gives to each of us.

You are God's son. You are God's daughter. With you He is well pleased. That is the mark of a sheep in God's flock. That is the mark of one whom God calls righteous. That is the mark of one who will inherit the kingdom of God. And because of that mark, because of that blessing, Christ our King sees every good thing you have ever done or will ever do as being done for Him.

So go out and feed the hungry. Go out and give a drink to the thirsty. Go out and welcome the stranger. Go out and clothe the naked. Go out and visit the sick and imprisoned. Do these things. Not because those things save you. Do them because you are saved. And because you are saved those works have meaning. They have purpose. They are works done for Jesus himself. By doing those things, you are serving not only your neighbor. You are serving your King.

You are serving them in the same way that he served you. Served you with his own Body and Blood. Served you with his very life on the cross. And continues to serve you until that day when he will come to us. And on that day, we will have no one left to serve. For there will be no hunger. No thirst. No strangers. No nakedness. No sickness. No sin to imprison us. On that day, the King will sit on His throne and all will be made new. Amen.