

Pentecost 27a Last Pentecost, Christ the King November 22, 2020

It has come to this on this last Sunday of the Church year; it has come to this. It has come to this as we near the end of this annus horribilis, this terrible year of 2020 – filled with human-made and nature-made horrors – full of cruelty and lies and deceits and wanton deaths and pointless separations and needless brutality and political subterfuge, motivated more often by hardened, even corrupt politicians with boundless egos and a lust for wealth and power than by the better angels of our nature and our God.

We now call today the Feast of Christ the King, replacing the older title that stands alongside it, the Last Sunday of Pentecost. The feast day, as many of you know, is under a century old – a recent innovation when liturgical time spans centuries. It was introduced by Pope Pius the 11th, to condemn the ideologies of secularism and nationalism, as Mussolini and Hitler stood in the background and gilded-age capitalists and fervent Marxists fought it out, setting up secular conflicts that have erupted ever since and corrupted our current political, electoral, and economic systems. Clearly, Pius' efforts to change the world by a new feast were futile.

Central to the feast is a celebration of Christ's Kingship together with an understanding of the very narrow senses in which Jesus is a King. Whatever the case, he is a far cry from our contemporary examples of Kingship – whether exemplified by a cold and murderous Putin, a fulminating and narcissistic Trump, a lethal Xi, or even a mild Joe Biden or a workaday Angela Merkel.

In Christ, we have a King not of this Earth, a King of compassion, a suffering King, but in today's Gospel, we also have a king of ultimate moral judgment. Christ the King in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, found only in Matthew, that most perfectionistic Gospel.

Now, parables are most often ambiguous and problematic; parables are designed to tease us and make us uncomfortable; if we feel comforted by a parable, scholars tell us, we haven't really understood it. And yet I sometimes wonder how this parable, clear as it seems, fails so miserably in its message.

Today's allegory is explicit. The person sitting on the throne is none other than the Son of Man come to judge the world. And his flock comprises sheep and goats. Clearly, sheep are good and goats are bad; sheep care for those in need and goats don't. And yet, and yet, every goat and every sheep doesn't seem to understand the obvious distinction between sheep and goats or how they fit into either category. Self-knowledge, which we are so sure we possess to a workable degree is totally absent from the parable. Sheep and goats do not know their own kind; only Jesus can separate the sheep from the goats. And therein lies the trap in the parable. Most of us, I believe, think we're sheep – well, maybe not perfect sheep but pretty good sheep, good-enough sheep, adequate sheep, good enough to get by. I do. I know I'm a pretty good sheep. But on the last day, will I be laboring under an illusion of my good-sheepness, am I correct about being a pretty good sheep, or am I in for a big, big surprise?

Sheep are by definition stupid. Goats are by definition selfish and stubborn. And goats are bad bad bad. And sheep are good good good. But neither the sheep nor the goats has the faintest clue of their own goodness or badness. The goats ignore the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, and the prisoner without a qualm, without even noticing. The

sheep tend to those in need without any knowledge of their own goodness and with scarcely a thought about who deserves their gifts of Christlike compassion. Is that what I do?

Not only do sheep and goats lack self-knowledge; they are morally blind – for tragic ill or unbelievable good. In this parable, to speak colloquially, nobody knows nothing about nothing – except, that is, the Son of Man on his throne of glory. I know for a fact that my sainted, near-perfect grandmother daily gave all she had to anyone in need, and yet regarded herself as a miserable sinner and repented daily for falling short of the glory of God. A sheep without knowing it. Could that be you?

And yet – I’m preaching to me – many of us hear this parable and say to ourselves, to themselves, “I may not be perfectly good to others, but I’m good enough.” And we go our way with some minimal, grudging satisfaction – or I do – without heeding that stickler Jesus’ admonition in Matthew: “(5: 48) Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

So, let me ask again, where is this parable leading us? To good enough? To pretty good? No, I don’t think so. The parable is posing perfection as its goal, God help us. The only question at the end of the Church year, at the end of this annus horribilis is, to quote a favorite biblical interpreter (Robert Farrar Capon, *Parables of Judgment*, 177), the only issue is that “We simply don’t know [anything for sure], and we should all shut up and trust [Jesus] in the passion we cannot avoid.”

For without that trust, without God’s grace, I, for one, can’t even be pretty good, or maybe better than I think, or maybe worse. And without God’s forgiveness, I will surely perish. But I do know that if all who call themselves Christian would follow our Lord’s example, we would be living today in the middle of a pandemic, a pandemic of kindness, as one epidemiologist puts it – a pandemic of clothing the naked and feeding the hungry and binding up the wounds of those without care and nursing the prisoner and welcoming the stranger. A pandemic of kindness, no, a pandemic of love. Come Lord Jesus. Come.