

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Reign of Christ, Sunday, November 23, 2014  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today we celebrate the last Sunday of the church year as the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. Different from the calendar we follow in the world, the Christian calendar follows Jesus and organizes the year around different spiritual themes related to Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and return. The year ends today as we look to the end of time when Jesus Christ returns in glory. In some ways it's a slightly odd celebration because the apocalypse is often explored as a catastrophe not an occasion to celebrate. But then not all endings are bad... the end of poverty, the end of war, the end of suffering... these are all endings that would be most welcome! And they are the kinds of endings for which we hope and pray today, as we recall God's promise that Jesus reigns in glory at God's right hand, and will one day return in a final judgement.

We began with the down-to-earth view of Ezekiel offering a word of divine truth based on a farmyard. It is a pastoral scene through and through, where God is the shepherd who gathers the sheep - even lost and scattered sheep - and provides all that is necessary for abundant life. It is beautiful and comforting to hear the promise: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." <sigh> But then comes the "but"... "but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." And then the call of the prophet is renewed: "Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them..." And a message of judgement and salvation follows. The weak will be saved, the strong condemned. The bullies will be put in their place. It is a passage full of good news, as long as we don't find ourselves as one of the fat sheep!

Ezekiel's prophecy is followed by glorious and hopeful words from Paul to the Ephesians. It begins with thanksgiving for the faith and love of the Ephesians and then a prayer in which Paul asks God to give these faithful "a spirit of wisdom and revelation... so that... [we] may know what is the hope to which [God] has called [us], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe..." It is glorious and hopeful and beautiful. It is the heavenly view of Jesus the Christ, our Saviour, that offers such a contrast to the earth-bound view of Ezekiel's fields and sheep pens. I much prefer hearing about Christ "in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come." The heavenly view, the view far above the dirt and the muck of real life, provides such relief and escape. It is good news, glorious good news, that we need to hear from time to time.

It is there from that heavenly view, that our Gospel passage also begins, as Jesus describes the end of time: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him..." It's quite the other-worldly word picture complete with angels and a heavenly throne, just the kind of escape from the daily grind that we want to hear about - thanks Jesus - but it doesn't last. We don't have any time at all to settle into the wonder and majesty of it when heaven suddenly transforms into a farmer's field, reminding us of Ezekiel's prophecy: "All the nations will be

gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.” Thankfully Jesus keeps right on talking, so the question of the hour... the question that immediately rings through the ages... doesn’t have time to land: “am I a sheep or am I a goat?” And how might the answer to that matter? But like I said, Jesus keeps talking, so the questions can just flit by, for now at least...

Barely taking a breath, Jesus continues: “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’ The farmer’s field with its goats and sheep disappears as quickly as it came to give way once more to that other-worldly, heavenly scene. It gives us time to take a breath, to forget any lingering livestock questions, and imagine ourselves blessed by God to receive the inheritance that is ours with God’s beautiful promise. But this comfort doesn’t last long either, for criteria come all too quickly: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Heaven is invaded by a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter, a hospital, a prison... and by strange, unknown people. These things are not what heaven is supposed to be about... Heaven is about being far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named... Heaven has angels and majestic thrones.

Even the people in the story are confused... these righteous who are on God’s right hand... the sheep who have already been told they will inherit the kingdom... they don’t even know how they got there! “Ahh... when did we do all these things for you?” they ask. “This feeding and watering and welcoming, this clothing and caring and visiting... for you, God? Huh?” And the heavenly king answers: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” The righteous in the story are then sensible enough to just nod... or at least they don’t say anything else. Because the heavenly king then turns to the left - to the goats - and the process is repeated in reverse. The unrighteous goats have just as little understanding as the righteous sheep... “errr... how is it that we have become the accursed, banished to eternal fire?” they ask. “When was it that we ignored your need for food, water, welcome, clothing, caring or visiting?” And the opposite answer is given: “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And so the final judgement comes: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Ok... so, I’m going to just say it... the whole scene is scary. For all of you here who are much better people, much better Christians, than me, perhaps you don’t find it so, but for me... it’s uncomfortable at best and down-right scary at worst. Eternal life... eternal punishment... it’s all so final and so, well... eternal! And I’m just a simple farm animal who doesn’t really know what the heck gets me here or there... left or right. This is one of the times in scripture that it is not faith, but doubt that offers the greatest hope of salvation.

This passage is the end of Jesus’ fifth and last major speech in the Gospel of Matthew. The speech began in chapter 23 when Jesus pronounced judgement, warning and woe on the crowds and the disciples by focussing on the serious mistakes made by the scribes and Pharisees. It is those who are most confident in their own righteousness who think they can get away with not practicing what they teach who are most in danger: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (23:12) But after the public part of the

speech, it transitions in chapter 24 to speak of end times, the coming judgement, and it's delivered not to the crowds but just to the disciples. So Jesus' words today are for insiders, for the community already gathered around Jesus words and actions, and calls them, calls us, to an authentic life devoted to deeds of justice and mercy. It's doubt that saves us because if we have none, if are too confident that we are already the righteous, we are less likely to strive everyday to live Jesus' call to self-giving care of others in feeding, watering, welcoming, clothing, caring and visiting. If we \*are\* righteous, we don't have to \*act\* righteous... so it's better to doubt. It's better to be a little uncomfortable and unsure about our status; it's better to be at least a little unrighteous, while not being so scared or worried that we give up altogether or live out of fear rather than love.

Am I a sheep or am I a goat? That is the question. In the end, God decides. And this is good news. At the final judgement, the decision is taken out of our hands and into the hands of a Creator who has throughout history, ancient and modern, demonstrated gracious and merciful love time and time again. In the end, the heavenly and the earthly worlds collide and much to our surprise, it is not confession of faith in Christ that is the ultimate criteria of judgement, but rather our self-giving care of others. The good news is that God created us - God created our 'selves' and in declaring creation to be 'very good,' gave us very good selves to give to others. The good news is that Jesus redeemed us by showing us the way of self-giving and the fulfillment of the promise of new and abundant life for those who follow the way. The good news is that the Holy Spirit encourages us by putting God's power to doubt and to live faithfully in our very hearts and minds. The good news is that when earth and heaven unite, fear and oppression, hunger and thirst, loneliness and sickness, come to an end because the righteous are doing their part along with God. In the end, may we be counted among them.