

Solemnity of Christ the King - (Year A) – November 26, 2017

EZ 34:11-12, 15-17; PS 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6; 1 COR 15:20-26, 28; MT 25:31-46

Every Sunday, when we pray the **Confetior** (the “**I confess**” prayer), we say:

I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do...

We **mention** sins of omission—*what we’ve failed to do*—but do we really **think about** what that *means*?

As one of my favorite spiritual books—*I Believe in Love*—points out:

“People examine themselves on faults and failings, and not on their intimacy with Jesus. It has been rightly said that sins of omission—of which we so rarely think to accuse ourselves—are more frequent than others: lack of faith, of hope, and of charity...”

I Believe in Love, p. 23

The common tendency in Confession is to focus more on **the bad that we *did***, than on **the good we *didn’t* do**—on our *list of sins*...rather than our **lack of love**.

We will, however, be judged **severely** for our lack of love for others. The failure to love others as Christ commands is simply a visible manifestation of our lack of love for God, because as **St. John the Evangelist** writes in his **1st New Testament Letter**:

We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also. (1 Jn 4:19-21)

This short statement by **St. John** provides an excellent key for interpreting the parable that Jesus told in **today’s Gospel**.

And it’s important that we start where **John** starts...with these words:

We love, because he first loved us. (1 Jn 4:19)

This is an important fact that's easy to overlook, but one which is clear from **today's Readings**, if we're paying attention.

Ever since Adam and Eve's disobedience, which ruptured humanity's relationship with God, we have been **severely broken** and **spiritually sickened** by our *sins*. So, when God speaks in our **1st Reading** today through the **Prophet Ezekiel** about rescuing us lost sheep, it's unmistakably clear that **he does *not* want us to perish**, but to be saved:

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark. I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord GOD. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly. (Ez 34:11-12, 15)

Why does God even **bother** with us, when we've made such a mess of things? Precisely because of **who God the Father is**. Jesus alludes to this in his very important *distinction* between **Heaven** and **Hell** in the parable.

Jesus describes **Heaven** as, *the kingdom prepared for you [by my Father] from the foundation of the world.* (cf. Mt 25:34)

In other words, *God the Father prepared Heaven for us...and us for Heaven!* And when he sees us on the path to **Hell**, he doesn't sit back and let us perish, but instead, as **John** says in the **4th Gospel**:

...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already... (Jn 3:16-18)

God did not want us to tumble into Hell, so he sent his Son, Jesus—the **Good Shepherd and King of the Universe**—to rescue us. *Hell was not made for us...and we were not made for Hell!*

Jesus described **Hell** as, *the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.* (cf. Mt 25:41)

Though Hell was not prepared for humans, many humans *do* end up there, as Jesus proclaimed earlier in **Matthew's Gospel** when he warned his followers to:

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” (Mt 7:13)

So, **John the Evangelist** begins with God's love for us—a love which is even more powerful precisely because we're so broken and in such dire need of it. But then, John **proclaims** what Jesus *illustrated* in today's parable:

If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 Jn 4:20)

The **way** Jesus tells his parable helps us **refine our understanding** of what it means to be an **authentic** disciple of Jesus. And it's most evident in the difference between **the way** the sheep and the goats **respond**. But we must listen **carefully** to the words, or we'll miss the distinction!

Listen first to the words of those who **did** serve the King by serving those in need:

...the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ (Mt 25:37-39)

Now listen to the protest of those who **neglected** the King by neglecting those in need:

Then they will answer and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?’ (Mt 25:44)

When the sheep respond, it's very **personal**. They say when did we see **YOU** hungry; when did we see **YOU** thirsty; when did we see **YOU** a stranger; or clothe **YOU**. When did we see **YOU** ill or in prison?

The goats don't focus on Jesus, but on the **activity**—the *action*. The sheep say “YOU” **eight times**. The goat say “YOU” **one time** and focus on meeting “needs” rather than honoring the *relationship*.

Authentic Christian love and service is motivated by our relationship with Jesus.

Without a focus on Jesus, the service is nothing more than **social work** and social work can be done with **no reference to Jesus**. Jesus is not **recruiting social workers**...he's *developing disciples*—men and women who love others as much as Jesus loves them—as much as Jesus loves us!

Self-absorbed Christians tend to look at religion as an **obligation**. And that's why there are so many Catholics who do nothing but the bare minimum to “qualify” as Catholic—going to Mass now and then, but **doing little or nothing more** than that—without ever giving their hearts to Jesus, or to others...for the sake of Jesus.

For such a person, Jesus' parable **should** be *terrifying* because it shows that what prevents many people from spending eternity in Heaven is less about the **bad** they've **done** than it is about the **good** they *didn't do*.

In both the **1st Reading** and the **Gospel**, there is clear talk of *judgment*. Both Ezekiel and Jesus speak of sheep and goats to denote those who will be judged favorably and those who will be condemned. And from the **Gospel of John** we must remember that, although **Jesus did not come to condemn**, but rather, to **save** us, *there is still a condemnation*. John writes:

He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already... (Jn 3:16-18)

John says that **he who does not believe is condemned**. *Jesus*, in his parable, says that he who does not serve others out of concern for **them** and for love of **Jesus** will be condemned. Clearly, by considering both statements, we see that believing—or **having faith**—means much more than paying lip service to our religion. It means *expressing that faith in love for others*. That's why it's not enough to **say** we're Catholic—why it's not enough to **say** we believe in Jesus—but not *express* that faith through love.

This is a good time to ask yourself: Besides going to Mass on Sunday...what do I do for others, *especially in my parish*? How do I contribute, *personally*, to the parish's mission of reaching out to the lost sheep?

Jesus himself said, earlier in Matthew's Gospel:

“Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Mt 7:21)

An **authentic Christian** expresses his or her love for God precisely to the extent that he or she serves their fellow human beings.

So, if we end up condemned to Hell, it is because we **chose** it, by merely paying lip service to our faith, and neglecting **God**...neglecting **others**...and condemning **ourselves** to eternal separation from **all love**.

Let's do a little thought experiment to see what this might look like:

Moon Meditation

That's **Hell**, my brothers and sisters.

All self...and nobody else.

And this little exercise barely scratches the surface of what eternal separation from love would be like.

If we love Jesus...and love one another—not in some *sappy sentimental way*, but rather, as Jesus loved us, by **giving of himself without reserve**—then, we'll see each other in Heaven.

And that's no mere figment of our imagination.

That's a promise!

From Christ...our King!