

FIRST READING – A CHRIST THE KING

A reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Thus says the Lord God:

“I myself will search for my sheep,
and will seek them out.

As a shepherd seeks out his flock
when he is among his scattered sheep,
so I will seek out my sheep.

I will rescue them from all the places
to which they have been scattered
on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,
and I will make them lie down,”
says the Lord God.

“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,
but the fat and the strong I will destroy.

I will feed my sheep with justice.

As for you, my flock,” thus says the Lord God:

“I shall judge between one sheep and another,
between rams and goats.”

Pause for **THREE** seconds

then look up at the people

and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING – A CHRIST THE KING

A reading from the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:

Christ has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.
For since death came through a man,
the resurrection of the dead has also come through a man;
for as all die in Adam,
so all will be made alive in Christ.
But each in his own order:
Christ the first fruits,
then at his coming those who belong to Christ.
Then comes the end,
when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father,
after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.
For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.
The last enemy to be destroyed is death.
When all things are subjected to him,
then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one
who put all things in subjection under him,
so that God may be all in all.

PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING – A CHRIST THE KING

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord

Jesus said to his disciples:

“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,
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.

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;
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.’

Then the righteous will answer him,
‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food,
or thirsty and gave you something to drink?
And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,
or naked and gave you clothing?
And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison
and visited you?’

And the king will answer them,
‘Truly I tell you,
just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,
you did it to me.’



GOSPEL READING (CTD.) – A CHRIST THE KING

Then he will say to those at his left hand,
‘You that are accursed,
depart from me into the eternal fires
prepared for the devil and his angels;
for I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not give me clothing,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’
Then they also will answer,
‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison,
and did not take care of you?’
Then he will answer them,
‘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 these will go away into eternal punishment,
but the virtuous into eternal life.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

The liturgy now sets Christ's kingship in an eschatological context, as does the Bible. His enthronement at the Ascension is the opening act of his final eschatological reign, and his continued heavenly rule between the Ascension and his return marks the progressive defeat of the powers of evil. For he must reign until he has "put all his enemies under his feet" (Second Reading).

Reading I: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17

There is a close connection between the images of king and shepherd, a connection presumably going back to the figure of David.

Ezekiel prophesied during the Babylonian exile. In the earlier part of chapter 34, he delivers a strong indictment against the pre-exilic kings of Judah who had been false shepherds. Because of this, YHWH himself will henceforth take over the shepherding of this people (Ez 34:15). YHWH will seek out the lost and bring back the strayed (Ez 34:12, 16), an allusion to Israel's return from exile and resettlement in the Holy Land (see Ez 34:13, omitted here).

The verses suggest that Ezekiel envisaged a theocracy, for the monarchy was not to be restored. Later on in verses Ez 34:23-24, however, YHWH says that YHWH will set over them David, who will be a shepherd and prince among them. The apparent contradiction is resolved if the Davidic king is the agent and representative of YHWH, a concept that carries over into the messianic hope.

The same *prima facie* contradiction occurs in the gospels. In the Synoptic parable of the lost sheep, which is undoubtedly authentic to Jesus himself, it is YHWH who seeks out the lost sheep, though he does so implicitly through Jesus. But in the Johannine allegory of the Good Shepherd, Christ is the Good Shepherd, not alongside of nor in addition to YHWH, but as the representative of the Father. It is in Jesus Christ, therefore, that the prophecy of Ezekiel comes finally to rest.

The last verse introduces the note of judgment. The shepherd will distinguish between sheep and goats. This links the First Reading with the Gospel (see the caption).

Responsorial Psalm 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6

A slightly different arrangement of verses from this psalm was used on the fourth Sunday of Lent this year. Here the psalm is much more suitable, for it forms an obvious response to the passage from Ezekiel.

Reading II: 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28

Many important problems are raised in this passage from Corinthians, such as the concept of Christ as the first fruits, the Adam/Christ typology, the importance of “order” in the resurrection process, and its relation to the Corinthians’ gnostic view that Christians were already raised. But today’s theme, the kingship of Christ, as well as the caption, suggests that we should concentrate on 1 Cor 15:24: “Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.”

One fact calls for comment, and two problems for discussion. The fact in question is that, according to Paul, Christ’s reign is to be of limited duration. He reigns “until ...” It is destined to be replaced by the kingship of God’s very self when Christ delivers the kingdom to the Father.

The first of the problems is the period covered by Christ’s reign. 1 Cor 15:25 is one of the passages to which “chiliasm” or “millenarianism” appeals. Its chief basis is Rev 20. The book of Revelation speaks of a first and a second resurrection. At the first resurrection, only the faithful Christians will arise to reign a thousand years with Christ (the millennium). This is to be followed by a second, or general, resurrection. 1 Cor 15:26 is then interpreted by means of Rev 20. This interpretation is untenable for two reasons: first, it takes the events of the book of Revelation to be successive rather than as varying descriptions of the same event; second, it allegorically harmonizes Revelation and 1 Corinthians.

It seems quite clear from 1 Corinthians that the reign of Christ is inaugurated with the resurrection-ascension (1 Cor 15:20, 27) and is destined to last until the Second Coming (1 Cor 15:23-24a). The kingdom of Christ is thus coterminous with the period of the church. “In chronological respect (not in spatial) the kingly rule of Christ and the Church completely coincide” (O. Cullmann). It is important to note that Christ’s kingdom is a period of perpetual warfare with the “enemies” that will still be under his feet (1 Cor 15:25). “The present kingdom of Christ is not a period of peace, but of glorious warfare” (H. L. Goudge).

The second problem is the idea of Christ’s delivery of the kingdom to the Father and his subjection to the Father. What can this mean? It means that during the period of Christ’s kingdom, the period of the church, God acts toward the world not directly but through Christ. That is to say, every act that God does toward the world or the church is an extension of the act that accomplished once and for all the history of Jesus of Nazareth.

But after the redemptive work of Christ has been completed at the consummation, God’s relationship with the redeemed universe will become a direct one.

“Now we see God and experience His action through the God-man who represents Him to us; then Christ will have brought us to the Father; we shall enjoy the Beatific Vision, and immediate union with God himself. ... God will be all in all, not only in Christians but in the whole realm that Christ restored to him.”*

Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

This pericope is often called the “parable” of the sheep and goats or of the Last Judgment. But such a designation is inaccurate. Except for the comparison in Mt 25:32-33, the whole story remains on the level of direct description. Its literary genre is that of an apocalyptic revelation. But there is a history behind the tradition. The pericope is a combination of four elements:

1. Mt 25:32-33, the simile of the sheep and goats.
2. A series of sayings about the reception accorded to Jesus’ disciples (Mt 25:35-39, 40b, 41-45).
3. The combination of 1 and 2 to provide an allegorical interpretation of the simile.
4. Introduction (Mt 25:31) and conclusion (Mt 25:46) and the placement of the whole in its Matthean setting.

We will discuss each of these elements in turn.

1. The simile of the sheep and goats. Following J. A. T. Robinson, we reconstruct this as follows:

It is with the kingdom of God as with a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

There is no reason why this should not be an authentic parable of Jesus. There is nothing allegorical about it. The kingdom is compared, not to a shepherd nor to the sheep and goats, but to the act of separation.

The story is similar to the parables of the wheat and weeds (Mt 13:24-30) and of the good and bad fish (Mt 13:47-50), both undoubtedly authentic parables of Jesus. The message is characteristic of Jesus’ eschatology: acceptance or rejection at the end. It is a story taken from Palestinian life.

During the daytime the sheep and goats are all mixed up. At night the shepherd separates them because the goats need shelter from the cold, whereas the sheep are hardy enough to stay out all night (J. Jeremias). Since sheep are white and goats black, their separation can imply an act of judgment, enabling the parable to be applied to the kingdom of God in a way characteristic of Jesus.

Acceptance or rejection of this message will determine which side one will be on at the Last Judgment—among the saved or the condemned. The final separation is being anticipated in Jesus’ ministry.

2. The sayings.

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.

When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing?

When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me.

Like other critics, T. W. Manson commented on the whole pericope that “it contains features of such startling originality that it is difficult to credit them to anyone but the Master himself.”

But, as J. A. T. Robinson has rightly observed, when critics talk like that, they are really speaking of these sayings, not the whole pericope. It is these that have the ring of the “Master himself.” But what do they mean?

They are commonly used by church preachers and by secular humanitarians as a piece of ethical teaching, inculcating concern for the victims of famine and oppression. God forbid that we should deny the necessity of such concern.

But we must question whether this is the true exegesis of this passage, and whether therefore it should be so used homiletically. It is closely akin to Mk 9:37 par.; Mk 9:41; and Lk 12:8f. par. (Q); cf. Mk 8:38 par.

Comparison with these sayings shows that the passage under examination, far from being a humanitarian lesson, is an assertion of the “shaliach” principle, according to which the acceptance or rejection of an accredited agent involves the acceptance or rejection of the sender, and the further assertion that acceptance or rejection of the accredited agent, like acceptance or rejection of the sender, will be validated at the Last Judgment.

The life situation in which this passage would have been spoken by Jesus would therefore have been when he was sending his disciples out on a mission.

3. That this was how Matthew himself understood these sayings is indicated by his addition of “who are members of my family” (RSV: “my brethen”) to the words “one of the least of these” (Mt 25:40, not in 25:45).

“Brethren” in Matthew always means disciples. Hunger, thirst, etc., symbolize the weakness and poverty of the disciples, and the relief given to them symbolizes the acceptance or rejection of them and their message, exactly as in the saying about the cup of cold water in Mk 9:41.

This interpretation will disappoint, perhaps even anger many, but we are responsible for a genuine exegesis of the text, not to make it say what we want to hear.

In the post-Easter church, the shepherd is equated with a king (Mt 25:40), that is, God. Thus, the parable became an allegory of the Last Judgment.

4. Finally, the evangelist takes up the allegorically interpreted parable and inserts the apocalyptic coloring, especially in Mt 25:31 and 25:41. As a result, the king of Mt 25:40 became identified, somewhat unusually and awkwardly, with the Son of Man of Mt 25:31. Matthew probably also inserted “all the nations” in Mt 25:32, equating the judged with the nations to which the disciples will be sent to preach the gospel in all the world (Mt 28:16-20).

*I quote from H. L. Goudge’s commentary on 1 Corinthians (Westminster Commentaries, 1915, fourth edition revised). I would call attention to this Anglican scriptural scholar, whose work antedated biblical theology in Germany. Goudge was Regius Professor in the University of Oxford between the World Wars. His work has been much neglected, even by Anglicans. Here is a subject for a master’s thesis!

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