

Our Lord Jesus Christ the King November 20, 2011 A

Reflection on the Great Sermon

On this feast of Christ the King, we close out our reflections on the Gospel of Matthew and Cycle A readings. Next weekend we will begin the Year of Mark and Cycle B readings. The following are some miscellaneous reflections on one of the best known gospels in the Bible, Matthew 25:31-46.

The authors of *Living the Word* 2007-2008 write:

Christ the King is pictured in today's Gospel as deciding the fate of all at the last judgment. "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father'" (Matthew 25:34). Under his title of Son of Man Jesus comes in glory for that final judgment. Jesus is also portrayed as a shepherd who "separates the sheep from the goats" (25:32). God had promised a Shepherd King through the prophet Ezekiel. "I will appoint one shepherd over them to pasture them, my servant David; he shall pasture them and be their shepherd" (Ezekiel 34:23).

The criterion for judgment is the presence or absence of faith-based acts of mercy toward the poor and needy. Already in the Old Testament there is the constant insistence on concern for justice and charity. To the prophet Isaiah, for example, God says, "Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). Christ associates himself with those in need. "Whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

The same authors continue with this reflection:

Tom is allergic to cats, even when they're not around but once were. His eyes turn red, and he starts to wheeze so that he has to excuse himself and leave. Oddly enough, he has lately befriended a neighborhood stray at his back door. He doesn't touch it, and he won't allow it into his house, but he feeds it regularly and even misses it when it doesn't show up on his stoop. Something moves us to care for the lost among us. It is often instinctive, and at times even contrary to our own best interests, as with Tom and his allergy to cats.

Is such sympathy for the underdog written on the back of our psyches? Are lost souls really long-lost kin? Is it guilt that moves us to contribute to food pantries

and bread lines or is it genuine compassion? If we are to believe in the Incarnation, that God has taken form in human flesh, then those instincts to visit shut-ins imprisoned in their own homes and to free those who still find themselves locked into poverty are Godly instincts. It is holiness bred in our bones, incapable of being held in.

Because someone is hungry, we find ourselves giving to a food pantry or volunteering at a soup kitchen. Because someone is a stranger, we welcome them into our neighborhood and seek ways to comfort the immigrant. Because someone is imprisoned by illness or old age, we visit them and check in on them. And because our own individual efforts often seems so meager in the face of so many needs, we seek ways to institutionalize our care through government policy and funding. It is all a Godly instinct.

Poverty in America

Jay Cormier writes:

Could you and your family live on \$22,000 a year? Everything—food, clothing, housing, transportation, tuition—a family of four making it on less than \$2,000 a month.

Of course you couldn't.

Yet one in six Americans are desperately trying to do just that. According to the September report of the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 15 percent of Americans are living below the poverty line—currently defined as \$22,314 for a family of four.

Given the current jobless rate and the devastated economy, it's hardly surprising. But such a poverty rate—one in six—means that poverty is much closer than we think—that the poor are in our midst.

And these poor are not just the unemployed, not just the unskilled, not just the unlucky.

The poor—our poor—are Jesus.

The unemployed technician who has been trudging from hopeless interview to interview for months is Jesus.

The desperate mom or dad working three or four part-time, low-paying jobs to feed their family is Jesus.

The child who goes to school hungry because there's nothing for breakfast and his family can't afford lunch money is Jesus.

Jesus sits at the table with the poor at the soup kitchen. Jesus shares the crowded house of family and

friends who share cramped quarters to save money. Jesus sleeps in the van with the single mom and her two kids because they can no longer afford their own apartment.

Jesus—Jesus the hungry, Jesus the thirsty, Jesus the stranger, Jesus the naked, Jesus the sick, Jesus the imprisoned—walks in our midst.

Have you seen him?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, you have.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Christ the Shepherd-King clearly and unequivocally identifies himself with the poor. Our first and most meaningful response to our baptismal call to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom in his Christ is our care for the poor, our work to alleviate poverty and injustice in our communities, our holding ourselves accountable for creating more opportunities for the under-educated and under-employed to provide for themselves and their families. Our "greatness" as disciples of God's Christ lies in our ability to reach beyond ourselves to bring justice, peace and reconciliation into the lives of everyone, in our seeing in every human face the face of Jesus.

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Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

People's basic material needs have to be taken care of before any kind of higher life is possible. But in many countries these needs have been taken care of. Does this mean then that the words of Christ about feeding the hungry or clothing the naked are no longer relevant? No indeed.

In Mother Teresa's memorable words: "The worst disease in the world today is the feeling of being unwanted, and the greatest evil is lack of love. What the poor need even more than food, clothes, and shelter, is to be wanted." Hence, the words of Christ are as relevant today as ever. We might put them as follows.

The King will say to those on his left:

"Depart from me, for *I was hungry*, not for food but for a smile, and all I got from you was sour looks. I was hungry for a word of encouragement, but all you did was criticize me. I was hungry for a word of appreciation, but you didn't give me so much as a crumb.

"*I was thirsty*, not for drink, but for a word of recognition, but all you did was nag and give out to me. I was thirsty for a sign of friendship, but you ignored me. I was thirsty for a little companionship, but you never gave me a drop.

"*I was a stranger*, and you refused to have anything to do with me. I was a child and you forbade your children to play with me because my clothes were dirty.

I was a neighbour, and you wouldn't allow me into your club because I wasn't in your class.

"*I was naked*, not because I lacked clothes, but because I lacked self-worth, and you refused to cover me. I was stripped of self-confidence, and you made me feel the chill wind of disapproval. I was naked from the loss of my good name through a story that wasn't true, and you refused to clothe me with the garment of truth.

"*I was sick*, not in body, but with doubt and worry, and you never even noticed. I was wounded by failure and disappointment, and you couldn't care less. I was sunk in depression, desperately needing the medicine of hope, and all you did was blame me.

"*I was a prisoner*, but not behind iron bars. I was a prisoner of nerves, and you shunned me. I was a prisoner of loneliness, and you gave me the cold shoulder. I was a prisoner of guilt, and you could have set me free by forgiving me, but you let me languish there to punish me.

"*I was homeless*, not for want of a homemade of bricks and mortar, but for the want of tenderness and affection, and you left me out in the cold. I was homeless for the want of sympathy and understanding, and you treated me as if I was a block of wood. I was homeless for want of love and acceptance, and you locked me out of your heart.

Then the King will say to those on his right hand:

"Come, you who have been blessed by my Father. For *I was hungry* for a smile, and you gave it to me. I was hungry for a word of encouragement and you praised me. I was hungry for a word of appreciation, and you thanked me.

"*I was thirsty* for a word of recognition, and you took notice of me. I was thirsty for a sign of friendship, and you wrote me a letter. I was thirsty for a little companionship, and you stopped to chat with me.

"*I was a stranger*, and you made me feel welcome. I was a young person from a bad area, and you gave me a job. I was socially inferior to you, but by your acceptance you built me up.

"*I was naked* for the want of self-esteem, and you covered me with self-worth. I was stripped of self-confidence, and you dressed me in the cloak of confidence. I was naked from the loss of my good name through a story that wasn't true, and you clothed me in the garment of truth.

"*I was sick* with doubt and worry, and with your cheerful attitude you lightened my burden. I was wounded by failure and disappointment, and by your supportive attitude you healed me. I was in a pit of depression, and by your patient attitude you gave me hope.

"*I was a prisoner* of nerves, and through your attitude of calm you set me free. I was a prisoner of

loneliness, and through your friendship you released me. I was a prisoner of guilt, and through your forgiveness you broke the chains of my guilt.

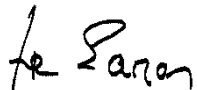
"I was homeless for want of tenderness and affection, and you embraced me. I was homeless for want of sympathy and understanding, and you listened to me. I was homeless from want of love and acceptance, and you took me into your heart."

There are lots of things we could do if we were more sensitive. It's not so much a question of giving things, but of giving of ourselves—of our time, our energy, and our love. Thus we will serve Christ and help to build his Kingdom.

"In the evening of our lives we will be judged on love" (St. John of the Cross).

This weekend I am at a youth conference in Atlanta.

Have a blessed week,



Ascension seeks to respond to today's Gospel

This Sunday's Gospel states that we will be judged on how we responded to those in need. I am grateful to all of you who are involved in our outreach ministries. Some details.

Thrift Store:

The Thrift Store has 170 volunteers from all walks of life and religious background, including some who need to do community service. Volunteers work from four (4) hours a month to forty (40) hours a week. The Thrift Store is open Tuesday to Saturday from 9:00AM to 4:00PM. Revenue raised this past year was \$314,000.

Disbursements: Social Concerns \$242,000; tuition assistance to our school \$40,000; operating expenses \$32,000. NO ONE is paid!

Social Concerns:

The figures below are from January 3, 2011 thru November 14, 2011.

Grand total number of families helped: 7,382

Total number of parishioners: 308

Total number of individuals in families: 17,711

Financial help given for utilities, shelter, medical, food pantry food purchases, etc.: \$349,843

Total number of families receiving food: 5,530

Total number of families receiving Thrift Store vouchers: 1,483

These numbers represent people coming in once in 30 days for food and once in a 12-month period for financial help.

Habitat for Humanity

Several Ascension parishioners are involved in Habitat. This year we contributed \$5,000 towards the building of a home.

Daily Bread

Daily Bread serves a luncheon meal daily to between 200 and 250 needy persons. Over the course of the year, we serve about 80,000 meals to 4,000 different individuals.

Ascension provides about 50 volunteers, which roughly is 10 percent of our total volunteer force of 500+.