



## Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe November 23, 2014 A

### Reflections on the Great Sermon that will be used to determine our eternal destiny

Today's Gospel, Matthew 25:33-46, is one that we ought to keep close to our minds and hearts for it is the sermon that will be used to determine our eternal destiny. In his book of homilies, Fr. William Byron, S.J., former President of the Catholic University of America, writes the following:

#### Separation of sheep from goats

*This is the Feast of Christ the King. The Gospel story places us—the entire human race—before the throne of Christ the King in what is often called the Last Judgment. We've been pilgrims on this earth. We've heard the word of God here on earth and either acted on it or rejected it. We've been part of the community of faith known as the Church. We've lived our lives. And here we are the end of time at the moment of judgment.*

*We are about to be separated into two groups—one Jesus has classified as sheep and the other goats. That classification will have eternal consequences—eternal punishment for the goats, eternal life for the sheep. The stakes are high. You can imagine great tension in the air.*

*Too late there at the point of judgment to alter the record, to undo misdeeds, correct omissions, and put more points on the board, so to speak. No, the score has been tallied. It is final. It is now just a matter of letting the record speak for itself.*

*To the sheep the king will say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."*

*Why, if you are so fortunate, are you lined up there with the sheep? Why will you inherit the Kingdom? Because, as Jesus explained, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." So, my friend, see yourselves standing there. Hear Christ speaking this way about you.*

*You, along with the other just men and women assembled there might find yourself asking, as the just in this Gospel story asked, "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?" And Christ, portrayed as the king in this story, will say to you: "Whatever you did for one of the least brethren of mine, you did for me."*

*There are sobering, even frightening dimensions of this story. First, it could not be plainer or more clear that Jesus is identifying with the hungry, the poor, the imprisoned, the homeless, and the sick. He is there; he is they.*

*Do we see Jesus there, can we locate him in them, in those people in need? Do we get anywhere near the places where they are—the hospitals, the prisons, the slums, the mean streets? Or, have we chosen to isolate ourselves from them and thus chosen to distance ourselves from him? These, as I say, are sobering, even frightening questions. We all have our own comfort zones, our private preserves, our security areas. This Gospel story is inviting us to step outside our safety zones in order to be able to help those in need.*

*It might just not be enough for us, on Judgment Day, to say we sent a check, or signed a petition, or sent a letter, or made a call, or contributed to the food drive. It might not be enough to have passed the hat, so to speak, without reaching out and touching the needy person. I'm not saying those failures will shift you immediately over to the company of the goats; I'm saying that indirect assistance may not really be enough. So search your soul and see what you find there by way of an answer to that question.*

*The Gospel story goes on to tune you in to the words the king speaks to those on his left—the goats: "Depart from me you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison and you did care for me." Again, these are frightening words. They elicit from the hearers there on the left, from the goats, defensive queries about when they saw him in need and failed to respond, and his answer once again is clear and direct: "Amen I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me."*

*How applicable is that to you? Are you guilty of neglect in the face of human hardship? The Gospel story is not accusing you of directly causing the hardship, directly inflicting harm; no, the Gospel is pointing out the danger to you of obliviousness, the negative consequences of your own neglect.*

*Each one of us risks becoming oblivious. The social and residential arrangements that we take for granted, the education and economic security that most of us enjoy, isolate us from the needs of others and, in a manner of speaking, insulate us from an awareness that we are obliged to help our neighbor in need. The beauty of this Gospel story is that it locates the person of Christ in the needy person; it points you into a direct relationship of love and care of Christ by explaining that Christ is there in the person in need of help and you are in direct contact with Christ when you reach out to the person in need of help.*

*If you want to get closer to Christ, get close to the poor, this Gospel is saying; feed him in the poor, visit him in prison, care for and comfort him in the ill.*

*Probably all of us have looked the other way at times when the beggar approached; some of us may have crossed over to the other side of the street. But consider for a moment how the beggar on the street may be doing you a favor. He or she may be bringing Christ to you when you, protected as you are from direct contact with the poor by your social and economic circumstances, do not really know the poor. You don't have ready access to the poor. But there they are from time to time, on the corner, at your door, on the driver's side of your car as you stop at the traffic signal. Don't ignore them, the Gospel today is telling you that they are Jesus in disguise. Help them and you are helping him.*

*It takes courage and creativity on your part to put yourself in face-to-face contact with a prisoner. It may take a certain amount of resourcefulness for you to become friendly with someone who is poor. It certainly takes time and a measure of generosity to visit the sick. All that is true. But it is also true, as your Gospel message today makes clear, that your salvation depends on your desire to reach out to the poor, to prisoners, to the sick, and your willingness to translate that desire into deed in some measureable, meaningful way.*

*No one ever said that discipleship was going to be easy!*

### **A Community of Mercy**

In his book of homilies, English priest, Fr. Dennis McBride, writes:

**The hidden Jesus:** *In today's Gospel Matthew gives us an apocalyptic vision of the last judgment, when all the nations—without distinction between Jew and Gentile, without discrimination between priest and people—are assembled before the king. It would be a pity to limit the value of the passage to a last judgment scene, because what it offers is a picture of the kind of community where Jesus sees himself to be recognized, the kind of community where Jesus sees himself to be at home.*

*The presence of Jesus is hidden among the poor and the vulnerable: where their needs are recognized, Jesus is acknowledged. When the hungry are fed, when those who thirst are offered drink, when strangers are offered hospitality, when the naked are covered in dignity, when the sick are seen to, when prisoners are visited, Jesus himself is touched by mercy. Their vulnerability is his vulnerability; he is present where human need is greatest.*

*According to this vision, if an alien came from outer space and asked us where our Jesus lived, we might have to take him to strange sanctuaries: refugee camps, back alleys, hospitals, prisons, and tell him that Jesus is to be found somewhere in these places. And tell him, too, that the blessed of God are to be found there, feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting, paying attention.*

**Human graciousness:** *In Matthew's vision we have a list of human needs and appropriate responses by a caring community. None of the needs is specifically religious: they are human needs as wide as the human heart. To those ordinary human needs there is the response of the kingdom. That response is an authentically human one, and therefore, a profoundly religious one; it is honoured by the title "blessed of my Father."*

*The blessed are praised for the simplest actions—and they are all actions, not attitudes—to those who experience simple human needs. There are no records of great heroism, no stories of conquest, no great trials or sufferings, no marvelous triumphs over disaster, no feats of imaginative daring. The requirements are simple and don't go beyond the capacity of any human being. There is no training required, no academic qualifications necessary. The actions are the simple response of those who pay attention to what happens in the world of the familiar and who move to answer the needs which confront them.*

*For Jesus, what happens in the world of the familiar has an eternity of importance about it: little acts of kindness have eternal significance; human graciousness and charity are ground enough for welcome into the fullness of the kingdom.*

***A community of mercy:** Those who are blessed are not conscious of having done any special service to Jesus: “When did we see you...? They have responded with mercy to those in need, without any great thought beyond that response. In the mission discourse in chapter 10 Jesus declared that any kind of service done to his apostles would be rewarded as done to him, and indeed to God: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me... Whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you he shall not lose his reward.” In today’s Gospel that thought is extended to embrace “one of the least of these brothers of mine.”*

*The thought now is that Jesus looks upon every kindness done to a person in need, however lowly, as a kindness done to himself. Those who are cursed bring the doom upon themselves because they failed to respond to simple human needs. They are not accused of violent crimes, or offences on a grand scale—any more than the blessed were praised for heroic virtue; rather, they are accused because they failed to act on the human need they saw before them.*

*The shared problem of the blessed and cursed is: “When did we see you?” That may be our question too, for all we see is the legion of those in need. But the Gospel asks us to interpret what we see. The Gospel challenges us to see the broken body of Christ in the brokenness and the woundedness of those we see around us. Christ still suffers in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. To pay attention to them is to pay attention to the broken body of Christ. And to do that is to be welcomed as blessed of God, because it is to live as a community of mercy.*

Have a blessed week and a very **Happy Thanksgiving!**

*Le Saran*