

11/15/20

26th Sunday after Trinity
The Great Day of Judgment

Matthew 25: 31-46

31) When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. **(32)** All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. **(33)** And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. **(34)** Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **(35)** For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in. **(36)** I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” **(37)** Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? **(38)** When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? **(39)** Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” **(40)** And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” **(41)** Then He will say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels; **(42)** For I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; **(43)** I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.” **(44)** Then they also will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?” **(45)** Then He will answer them, saying, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” **(46)** And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Every Sunday, when we recite together the second article of either the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed, we recount together the story of our salvation made up of those events in the life of Christ Jesus which we celebrate during the church year. His incarnation in the womb of the Holy Virgin and His birth, His sufferings for our sin under Pontius Pilate, His death on the cross there on the hill Golgotha, His victorious resurrection on the first Easter morning, His ascension to the Father’s right hand of power

and glory to fill all things and to rule all things—in those precious statements of what we believe, we proclaim to each other the history of what our Savior has done to set us free from sin and death and to win for us eternal life with Him. And in both of those creeds, we also proclaim to each other that the drama of our salvation-story has not yet reached its conclusion, and that only after the cataclysmic event recounted in our text has occurred will that story be complete. The incarnate Son of God will come again, we say together, to judge both the living and the dead. It is of that final judgment that Christ Jesus speaks here, and on which His Church focuses so intently now as we come to the end of the liturgical calendar.

Our Savior describes here a stunning event of the most cosmic significance. A day is coming—at an hour known only to our triune God Himself—when the history of this world will come to a sudden end. To the sound of seraphic trumpets, the Son of God will descend from the clouds in all His glory, surrounded by all His angels, and before Him will be gathered every single human being who has ever lived on this earth, including all those who are alive at His coming. We will all stand there before His throne for this one purpose—to hear His righteous judgment upon us.

It is a sobering thought which the Church sets before us each year as we come to the end of the Trinity season. Our Christian faith, the Gospel that we hear, the sacraments that we receive—at stake in these is not simply some bit of moral instruction to help us be a bit nicer to each other in this life. At stake for us and for all humanity is where we will spend eternity. You and I, too, will hear His verdict on that day. Our Savior tells us all this not in order to frighten us, but because He wants us to be joyfully confident when that Day of Judgment comes, and He wants that joyful confidence to govern all that we say and do as we wait for Him.

I

When the Son of Man has gathered all humanity before His throne of judgment, Jesus tells us, “He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats, And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.” And we must understand that already this separation which He makes is His judgment—it is His verdict. On His right hand He sets His people of faith, His sheep who have known His voice and who have followed Him as their good Shepherd whom they trust. The goats on His left hand are those who have rejected Him in unbelief.

To these goats on His left hand, the Judge will speak these terrible words of condemnation, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting 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; I was a stranger and you

did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.” And when they try to excuse themselves by asking when they had ever encountered Him in such need, He will answer, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” Their loveless treatment of their fellow human beings, Christ lets them know, is the surest proof of their unbelief. Their thoughtless cruelty toward those in need proves beyond all doubt that the Holy Spirit did not dwell in them to guide their actions and to lead them to walk in the footsteps of the One who gave Himself for us. And their cold lovelessness is also the proof that His verdict is completely just. They are condemned on the basis of the Law—on the basis of simple principals of right and wrong which they themselves acknowledge to be true and right.

II

It is the sheep on His right hand whom Christ first addresses as Judge, and we should notice that they, too, are surprised by our Lord’s verdict and by His words about what they have done. “You gave Me food and water,” He says to them. “you took Me in, clothed Me, visited Me when I was sick or in prison.” His sheep are surprised to hear this, both because they do not remember meeting Jesus when He was in need and also because they are fully conscious of their failures to live as they should. As His people of faith, however, they have put their trust not in their own works but in what Christ Jesus has done for them. They have trusted in His work of redemption, and thus they plead before Him as Judge, “Do not look at my life but at the perfect life of love which You, the incarnate Son of God, lived in my place. It is Your merits, O Virgin’s Son, which I hold up to You. Do not consider my failings in thought and in word and in deed, for I plead the blood which You—the Lamb of God—have shed for me to wash away my sins.” They are His sheep; they trust in the saving work of their Shepherd.

And the good which they have done to which the Lord Jesus points—their acts of kindness and of self-sacrificing love for the weak and the needy and the poor and the hungry—these are the sure evidence of their faith in Christ as their Savior. They have been made His sheep through such trust in Him—pronounced righteous with the holiness of Mary’s divine Son who lived for them and died for them and rose for them. Through their faith in Him and for His sake, the Holy Spirit has led them to think of others, to speak kindly to others, to help others. And with them, too, the divine Judge calls attention to the works which have flowed from their faith as evidence that His verdict is just.

III

Our risen and ascended Savior will come again, on a day and at an

hour which we do not know, to judge the living and the dead. We confess those words together every Sunday as part of the faith we share. Yet it is a truth which we can know only through faith in His word. And therefore, as time goes on and as our affairs continue as before, there is always the danger for us—weak and forgetful and easily distracted as we are—that these words could become dulled for us and lose their impact on us. As we come to the end of the Trinity Season, the Church therefore sets before us this appointed Gospel—with our Savior’s own description of that final Day of Judgment—in order to awaken us and to call us to the joyful watchfulness and readiness which our Lord wants to find in His people.

And as part of that joyful readiness, we are to keep in mind the high honor which our Lord ascribes to what we do for others. “Assuredly,” our Lord says also to us, “inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” For the sake of the blood which He shed for us on the cross of Calvary, He pardons the many imperfections in what we do—our hesitancy to serve others, the traces of selfishness which taint our giving, the thoughtlessness which too often erases from our minds the simple ways that we could help someone. Instead, the incarnate Son of God sees the works we do for others as flawless acts of love for Him.

That gives us a whole different understanding of—and it lends urgency to—the acts of kindness that we do for others, the words of encouragement that we speak to others, the prayers that we raise for others. The needy and the hungry in our community—it is our Savior’s face which we should see in them; our volunteer work to help feed and house and clothe them is work we do for Jesus Himself. The sick and the injured in the hospitals, those who can no longer leave their homes, the friendless and the lonely—our Lord tells us that when we take the time to bring some bit of joy to such as these, it is Christ Jesus Himself whom we visit. “You have done it unto Me,” He says.

That sets a joyful agenda for us every day. Because we are His people of faith, we are filled with confidence for that day of His return. And because we yearn for His coming, we can make the time go by more quickly—devoting ourselves to His service by serving those around us.

May the Holy Spirit help us to honor our Savior in this way, for Jesus’ sake.
Amen.