



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, November 20, 2005

The Feast of Christ the King

Festal Eucharist

at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Matthew 25:31-26

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CHRIST THE KING, LOVE ALMIGHTY

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus' depiction of the Last Judgment, which is unique to Saint Matthew's Gospel, is one of the best known passages in all of Holy Scripture. Today's Gospel is not a parable but an "apocalyptic revelation with dialogue" between the Judge and the judged. The magisterial New Jerome Biblical Commentary calls it "a masterpiece, the high point and grand finale" of Jesus' public ministry in Saint Matthew.¹ The very next thing that occurs is the meeting of the Council to plan Jesus' death.

So the Last Judgment and the death of Jesus go right together. The Son of man who sits on his glorious throne as King and Judge is the very same Son of man who is handed over to sinners and who gives his life as a ransom for many, whose body and blood are food for the hungry. This is a very different kind of judge from what we are used to. This judge is not "judgmental."

It is critical to see why the Father gives over all judgment to the Son of man. The Father sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. God incarnate, in the person of the Son of man, renders the Last Judgment, because the Son of man's entire mission from the very beginning has been to seek and to save the lost sheep. He has gone about befriending sinners, healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, restoring sight to the blind and sanity to the possessed, making the crippled whole, showing mercy to the afflicted; indeed his first principle was that the poor in spirit are blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden," he said earlier, "and I will give you rest." This is the one, the Son of man, to whom God has given final judgment, and it is very good news.

One of the many things meant by Jesus in his self-description, Son of man, is that he is the Representative Man, the one true, whole, fully Human Being. In him all of us, men, women and children, see our own health and wholeness, our integrity and completeness. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our Righteousness."

¹ *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, editors, p. 669.

So when acts of kindness are done, the Son of man receives them in the person of “the least of these my brethren,” because he gave himself for and identifies with them. Likewise, when “the least of these” are neglected, ignored, despised, or treated cruelly, then the Son of man is afflicted in their afflictions. Inasmuch you did it (did not do it) to the least of these, you did it (did not do it) to me.

Christ is Lord of eternal life. Jesus is the King of the Kingdom of heaven. Full right to pass definitive judgment on the works and hearts of human beings belongs to him as the Redeemer of the world. He acquired this right by his cross. The Father has given all judgment to the Son. Yet the Son, our Judge, is also our Advocate and Mediator.

In Saint Matthew’s Last Judgment, the King reveals to the sheep and the goats the truth of their lives by describing their deeds. Love is what is at issue. Their love, or lack of it, is manifested by their behavior. As they are described and revealed, the issue then becomes whether they have the capacity to enjoy the blessing of the King’s presence. A separation is necessary, simply because the sheep enjoy the King’s presence and the goats do not. The sheep love the King’s appearing; the goats do not love his appearing. What they were in their lives on earth is what they are forever. The sheep are invited to inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Note that Jesus acknowledges them as his own (even as they wonder how it is that they showed love towards him) simply by describing their deeds of kindness to “the least of these my brethren.” The goats, on the other hand, must depart. The King grants them the cursed destiny they have embraced all their lives right to the end. Departure is actually what they want, because they hate the sight of the King. They denied him in all their dealings with “the least of these,” and their denial is brought to final fruition: “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Each soul receives what each, from the heart and in truth, has always desired.

God’s infinite mercy surrounds but does not contradict God’s perfect justice. In Jesus Christ the Son of man, God has gone to the uttermost, even descended to hell, to remove every possible obstacle between himself and his children, children of all times and places; like the loving father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The only remaining obstacle is our own will. The Holy Spirit does just about everything to bring us back home. But there is one thing he does not do: He does not coerce us against our will. He does not coerce us, because love at some point must be free. We cannot be forced to love. We ourselves may, like the great poet John Donne, cry out, “Batter my heart, Three-personed God,” but this is a cry from the heart for help, a cry that arises from a choice that has been made.

“Faith, hope, love, abide, these three,” writes the Apostle, “but the greatest of these is love.” The reason love is greater than faith or hope is that in the End, faith and hope are fulfilled by sight. In the end, in the hour of death and in the Day of Judgment, we will have arrived, and Jesus will have his dialogue with us. Faith and hope will see their object, but love will still be necessary, forever, because God is Love. Without love, we will not be at home with God; without love, we shall dislike heaven. The judgment, the separation between the sheep and the goats, arises within the heart. The judgment is nothing more than the truth about us and what we have done with the time we have been given. The sight of the Son of man on his glorious throne will make all this clear.

If we fear we are loveless, then let us remember why we are here, and fear not. Haven’t we been drawn here by the love of God? Herein is love, says Saint John, not that we loved God but that he first loved us, and gave his Son for us, to be the expiation for our sins. God loves first; we respond and learn to love: “My song is love unknown, my Savior’s love to me, love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be!” People take to love naturally but they also need to learn love. Babies learn love by being held and hugged; they die without it. Foundling hospitals ask for volunteers to hold and hug the orphaned babies. The Church of Jesus is like a foundling hospital. We can turn to our brothers and sisters and begin to love them as we know God has loved us.

Right here is a good place to start. We do not have to be afraid. Jesus has made up the difference for us, the deficit between what God made us to be and what we have done with our lives.

All we need is love. Love grows stronger by exercise; it expands by being spent. The Son of man has shown us how to love, has opened the door to eternal life, and commanded us to love one another. We can go to hell if we insist; God forbid! God grant us to look with love at Christ the King, Love Almighty. Let us feed on him. And let us love one another as he loves us, and follow him back home to our Father.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.