
My Kingdom Come – As You Treat the Least of These My People

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 29 – Year A

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25.40).

It’s remarkable that this season of national debate over so-called ‘Obamacare’ and now, most recently, presidential care for the families of immigrants, is in sync with what we hear today in our celebration of Christ the King. In today’s gospel Jesus announces a king who also authorizes care and compassion, “for the least of these who are members of my family.” It’s in sync I say, that both our political situation centered on our president’s executive power, and our church season focused on the power of Christ the King, both include the elements of care, compassion, and making provision for the needy and the stranger among us.

But there’s also something ironic here, if we take seriously certain commentaries on today’s gospel that insist that it is not a social gospel about humanitarian commitment to the poor or the outcast. Rather this gospel, they insist, is about enthroning or exalting Christ himself so highly in our hearts and actions that we could catalyze the advent of God’s kingdom among ourselves in this very generation—in our own lives and in our communities.

That’s why we have these particular scriptures appointed for this last Sunday of the Pentecost season, and just prior to next week’s first Sunday of Advent. “The kingdom is coming! The kingdom is coming! The reign of Christ is upon us! Christ the King is near! That’s the pre-Advent note that today’s scriptures seek to sound in our hearts and lives, as if were living inside one of C.S. Lewis’s Narnia stories and overhearing the authorities declare, ‘Aslan is on the move! Did you hear? It’s Aslan—the Lion-King. He’s on the move again!’

Not only in our gospel but also in our epistle appointed for this Christ the King Sunday, I can tell you that’s what I hear the Spirit saying. Listen again, for example, to this apostolic prayer in the second sentence of our Ephesians reading for today:

I pray that ... with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power (Ephesians 1:17-19).

So what is this ‘great power working for us who believe?’ It is not merely the power of humanitarian service at work among us—however much human care and compassion are needed and hallowed or holy among us. Rather the great power that is bringing the reign of Christ closer in our own lives and communities is the power of God in you and me, as Ephesians says, to have ‘the eyes of our hearts enlightened’ so that we ‘may know what is the hope to which he has called us,’ and ‘what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.’ That hope and those riches that we inherit as subjects of Christ’s reign include brothers and sisters in whom Christ himself indwells but whom we must first befriend in order to have ‘the eyes of our hearts enlightened.’

Thus we need to be focused and discriminating here. For Jesus himself is quite focused and discriminating in an unusual

way. To repeat: in today's gospel he does not attend, as he does in other gospel texts, to any and every sort of person or group who may be described as "the least of these"—the generic 'poor and oppressed, outcast or mistreated.' Rather he specifically focuses on "the least of these *who are members of my family.*" Why does this emphasis occur in Jesus' prophetic preaching, and why should we observe it today as well?^[1] The answer to those questions may be referred to that singular story about Jesus' literal family attempting to lay claim to him during his earlier preaching and ministry.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, and elsewhere in other gospels, we hear the following story:

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.'

But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Matthew 12:46-50).

And here, Christian friends, is the 'tiny seed' principle of the emergence of God's kingdom: the principle that from small beginnings issue large outcomes and fruitful results. There are unseen, unsuspected, and unfathomable persons and groups, and hence whole communities and societies, who are also 'doing the will of our Father in heaven.' And therefore we are obliged to be proactively on the lookout for those whom Jesus would recognize as members of his family. These are people whom Jesus himself would say are doing the will of his Father in heaven—and yet are also "hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison," and thus needing our care and to be included in our discernment of God's kingdom and the reign of Christ (Matthew 25:44).

Of course, we ourselves may not always be able to know when such persons could be accounted as doers of the divine will. In the same way there were those in today's gospel who were unaware that it was the Lord they served—or the Lord they deserted—when they saw someone 'hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison' (Matthew 25:44). Accordingly they either acted—or failed to act—to take care of them.

Therefore we are obliged to adopt a second, more encompassing course of action; you and me, Christian friends. It was the apostolic strategy of Mother Teresa to treat any such prospective persons *as if* she were serving Christ himself. In the words that she made popular this was serving Christ in his "distressing disguise among the poorest of the poor."^[2] In a similar way, whether or not we have the ability to discern who are the members of Christ's family among the needy whom we encounter, we are obliged to be predisposed to treat them provisionally as we would treat Christ himself in disguise.

And that is why today's gospel is not meant to be a social gospel about humanitarian service to all people. Rather it is about Christ the King whose reign involves a kingdom or a community whose advent is also in disguise and cannot be fully discerned. Therefore we are obliged to act as if this community was already emerging among us and obligating us to be in solidarity with all prospective members of it—however likely or unlikely prospects they seem to be to us.

In preparation to be your 'Christ the King' preacher for today I've been thinking about how I could 'put-the-period' on this focus so that we might indeed, to quote Ephesians again, have 'the eyes of our hearts enlightened.' As many of you know I collect religion jokes from my Emory college students every year, and here is one that I think serves our purpose here today. It's a Forrest Gump joke—Forrest Gump who is the film character who seems intellectually stupid but also has a kind of amazing genius. In that connection we might imagine that Jesus would have added a category to his list of family members that includes treating people who seem intellectually inferior to us, or who have mental health challenges, with equal dignity and respect.

Now most of my students do not need to be told who Forrest Gump is. But they do need to be told that this joke depends on knowing the refrain of that familiar church hymn: "He walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own." Here's the story for your consideration in light of our gospel.

Forrest Gump and St. Peter

When Forrest Gump died, he stood in front of St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, "Welcome, Forrest. We've heard a lot about you." He continued, "Unfortunately, it's getting pretty crowded up here and we find that we now have to give people an entrance examination before we let them in."

"Okay," said Forrest. "I hope it's not too hard. I've already been through a test. My momma used to say, 'Life is like a final exam. It's hard.' "

"Yes, Forrest, I know. But this test is only three questions. Here they are."

1. Which two days of the week begin with the letter "T"?"
2. How many seconds are in a year?
3. What is God's first name?

"Well, sir," said Forrest, "The first one is easy. Which two days of the week begin with the letter "T"? Today and Tomorrow."

St. Peter looked surprised and said, "Well, that wasn't the answer I was looking for, but you have a point. I give you credit for that answer."

"The next question," said Forrest, "How many seconds are in a year? Twelve."

"Twelve?" said St. Peter, surprised and confused.

"Yes, sir. January 2nd, February 2nd, March 2nd ..."

St. Peter interrupted him. "I see what you mean. I'll have to give you credit for that one, too."

"And the last question," said Forrest, "What is God's first name? It's Andy."

"Andy?" said St. Peter, in shock. "How did you come up with 'Andy'?"

"I learned it in church. We used to sing about it." Forrest broke into song, "Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am His own."

St. Peter opened the gate to heaven and said, "*Run, Forrest, Run!*"

([Christforums](#) blog)

Well, there we have it! What I like about that joke is that it invites us to imagine that even the saints do not necessarily know whom God may include as members of Christ's family who qualify for inclusion in the kingdom of heaven. Thus even our most discriminating tests or interrogations may not be sufficient to tell us who we should be in solidarity with. Therefore we remain obligated to cast the net of the kingdom wider and wider in order to fulfill Jesus' family profile as announced in today's gospel. In our contemporary context that might include some unlikely categories in addition to people intellectually or mentally different from us. Could it include ex-offenders for example, or might former terrorists be on our list of likely excluded persons?

In that connection our universalist brothers and sisters maintain that no soul who really wants to find eternal felicity in an afterlife that involves enjoying God forever will be excluded from that destiny if they disavow their abuse or neglect of the 'least of these who are members of God's family.' But of course we are not entitled to fathom these matters before the time. All we are called to do is to act proactively so that we ourselves may be in harmony with that God's most beneficent destiny for all creation.

Toward that goal we have our Collect appointed for today, our opening prayer which I commend to us again. The Lord be with you ... Let us pray:

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. ([The Lectionary Page](#))



Hagen, Susan, **Recollection Tableaux:**

Inmate shortly after processing ^[3]

[1] I am indebted for this exegetical insistence to Reginald Fuller's cautionary commentary in *Preaching the Lectionary* (Liturgical Press, 1984), revised ed., pp. 199-200.

[2] "The story of Mother Teresa's life is no mere humanitarian exploit, as she would be the first to declare. It is a story of biblical faith. It can only be explained as a proclamation of Jesus Christ by - in her own words - "loving and serving Him in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor, both materially and spiritually, recognizing in them and restoring to them the image and likeness of God" (*Constitutions of the Missionaries of Charity*, I, 1)" "FUNERAL MASS FOR MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA," HOMILY BY H.E. CARD. ANGELO SODANO, 13 September 1997

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/1997/documents/rc_seg-st_19970913_sodano-madre-teresa_en.html

[3] From **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

<http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54279> [retrieved November 21, 2014]. Original source: Ingorr from Flickr Creative Commons. From an art exhibit at the Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, PA.

I found this image on the webpage of a lectionary for today's readings. It's the Revised Common Lectionary that is provided on the internet by the Vanderbilt Divinity Library here in the South; in nearby Nashville, Tennessee. I call it a "representation" because it is not a photograph of any actual prisoner but a sculpture or installation by artist Susan Hagen. She created the artwork as part of an art exhibit at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. "The installation depicts scenes of prison life presented in plaster sculpture. In this particular work, the inmate is hooded, and separated visually and metaphorically from the other inmates."

Hagen titles the work significantly with the label: "Recollection Tableaux: Inmate shortly after processing."

<http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54279> Perhaps that title, "Recollection Tableaux," gives a clue: by featuring this artwork the divinity library at Vanderbilt may be inviting us to 'recollect' the focus of our gospel appointed for this Christ the King celebration today: "And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me"" (Matthew 25.40).