

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, November 26, 2023

The Last Sunday after Pentecost // Proper 29, Year A

## The Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me 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 nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

## Background and general observations

*The last Sunday of the church year has at times been called "Christ the King" Sunday. Today, we crown the entire year with a special focus on the peculiar and profound nature of Christ's kingship. When we talk about Christ as King, we are obviously talking about a different kind of kingdom, the Kingdom of God. The two primary images of Christ as King are found at his birth (poor and in a manger, born a child and yet a king) and at his death (a crown of thorns, mocked, scourged and crucified between two criminals).*

*In the cycle of the church lectionary, we sometimes have appointed for the last Sunday after Pentecost a Gospel lesson depicting Christ being mocked, stripped, beaten, and crucified, while scoffers call out sarcastically, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Clearly, the kingship of Jesus is not something we recognize on the surface of things. And this kingly power is not evident to the whole world, but only to the eyes of the faithful. In a way, we are putting our trust—our whole lives—in something many people cannot trust, see, or sense at all.*

*For this Christ the King Sunday, we have appointed the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats, and there are many powerful ways in which this parable can work on us and deepen our faith. One very helpful way of approaching this lesson is to listen to it as if Jesus were telling the parable for the very first time. Do not try to "figure out what it really means," and do not leap to an interpretation. Simply listen to the story, let the characters come to life, listen to the surprise in their voices...again, don't worry about getting the "real" meaning, but let the parable work inside you, beyond your reasoning intellect and beyond your rational desires to get to the bottom of things. Trust that, on some level beyond your mind and deeper than you may realize, the parable is changing you and that a new kind of knowing will be rising in you. We do this all the time when we*

*see or hear something extraordinary. We do not try to figure out what a beautiful sunset or a transcendent piece of music means; rather, we experience those things, are moved by them, and are, quite often, transformed by something deep and ineffable working on us, dwelling within.*

## **Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives**

1. During his ministry, Jesus taught things like this: “Love your enemies;” “Do good to those who persecute you;” “Forgive not seven times but seventy times seven;” “As you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

How would this world be run differently if the Lord’s passions were passions we, too, were pursuing? How would this world be different if God were in charge? (That is, if Christ was King?) How would your church or community be run differently, if God were in charge?

Most importantly, how would your own life be run differently, if God were in charge?

2. Success is measured differently in the Kingdom of God than it is in the kingdom of this world. How so?

Where do you hope you—and your family, your children—will be more successful, in God’s kingdom or in the kingdom of this world? How will it be measured? How will we know if we have achieved “success”?

If one of our primary hopes is that our children will be “successful” or at home in God’s kingdom, how is that made evident? What messages are we sending? How can we ensure “success”? How can we encourage and celebrate the “success” that is a rich life of faithfulness?

3. Marcus Borg has written, “In the United States, the central values of our culture are the ‘three A’s’: attractiveness, achievement, and affluence.” (*Heart of Christianity*, p. 190)

Do you agree?

Based on what you know of Jesus, what are the central values of his kingdom?

4. Surely, most of us know someone who has no interest in church or religion and yet is a good and charitable person—what is this person’s fate in the life of the world to come?

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, those who cared for the hungry, sick, imprisoned, naked, etc. are surprised to hear Jesus thanking them (“When did we see you and do all of these things for you?). Jesus tells them that they cared for him whenever they cared for the least, and he calls them blessed and invites them to inherit the kingdom prepared for them.

The reading today invites us to consider that the essence of being a Christian is not about *believing* the right things but about *living* God’s love. The sacraments of the Christian community, Bible study, prayer, worship, etc. are intended to help us live more fully and consistently in God’s love. But these ministrations of the church are means to an end (living in God’s love), and some might arrive at that end by other means (that is, not through church attendance, Bible study, prayer, etc.).

Consider for yourself how your life in the church—prayer, Bible study, worship, and the sacraments—contributes to your staying focused on your true life, your true King, and your calling to live faithfully in a kingdom that so much of the world does not recognize. Share with one another some of the ways you stay focused and centered in an invisible but powerful source of strength and purpose whom many in the world do not see.

5. At least some of the time, we all do the best we can to be kind, generous and caring people. We volunteer for causes that help us interact with and care for Jesus in “the least of these.” But few of us achieve the status of a St. Francis, who gave away everything he had and voluntarily identified completely with the poor. We all have been selfish or ignored the needs of others, at times because we did not know what to do, or felt uncomfortable, or thought we had nothing to give...or maybe we were simply too tired.

Some have said that there are both sheep and goats in each of us. That is, there are parts of us that are going straight to hell. And the Good News is that we will be glad to see those parts of ourselves go and be destroyed. The Good News is that the goats in us will be separated from the sheep in us, and all that has caused us shame and guilt will be done away with forever. *Good riddance*, we’ll say.

It is the end of one church year and the beginning of another. How might we start to experience something of a separation of the sheep and the goats in us now, so that we can begin the process of saying, “Good riddance” today?



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