

THE LAST 'KRISIS'

Ezekiel 34. 11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1. 15-23

Matthew 25. 31-46

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today's well-known passage in St Matthew's gospel concludes a series of parables given by our Lord just before the beginning of the Passion. However, it is not quite correct to call today's passage a parable of the Kingdom, even though Jesus uses some elements of a parable when he likens the separation of the righteous from the wicked to the separation of sheep from goats by a shepherd. Rather, this story is what some commentators call an 'apocalyptic revelation', a description of the final judgement of good and evil and their eternal separation. On the Feast of Christ the King, the Sunday that concludes another Christian liturgical year, it is fitting for us to look at some of the essential elements of Christ's depiction of how we shall be judged.

Did you know that the Greek word that is used for 'judgement' in the New Testament is 'krisis' (spelt with a k); and that this word is the Greek root of our English word 'crisis' (spelt with a c)? Associated Greek words used in the New Testament are also rich in meaning. 'Kriterion' (spelt in Greek with a k) signifies the means of judgement; and 'kritikos', the root of our English word critic, means the one who is able to judge. A *crisis* exposes and clarifies things, which the Last Judgement (or the 'last crisis' if you will) most certainly will do. As our Lord said, the Last Judgement will involve a final separation of what is good from what is evil. This separation is not simply a division between individuals, but also a winnowing and cleansing within, like a fire which refines gold and consumes the dross.

It is interesting to note that Jesus uses the term ‘Son of Man’ to designate the ‘Kritikos’ or the King who sits in judgement. It is not God the Father, but rather the Son (and more particularly the Son in his triumphant human nature) who judges. Shortly before his Passion, Christ said these words in St John’s gospel: ‘Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation’ (Jn 5. 15-29).

You and I shall be judged by the Son of Man, because he has been tested and tried in every way as we are, yet without sinning. This is good news; it means that the one who took our nature upon himself to save human life is the one who will also judge human life. The mission of the Son of Man was foreseen ages before his incarnation in our appointed lesson from Ezekiel, where we read: ‘I will seek the lost...and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.’ And verse 17 adds, ‘As for you, my flock,...I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats’ (Ez 24. 11-17).

The ‘kriterion’, or instrument and means of judgement from the Son of Man is a simple question: How have we, his brothers and sisters in the flesh, made use of the time and opportunities given us to love and serve one another, especially those whom he calls the ‘least of these’? To be specific, what have you and I done to minister to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned?

In reflecting on these simple conditions, which can certainly be interpreted literally on a first level, we then do well to consider how our Lord had a way of adding dimensions. There are many ways to be hungry and thirsty; to be a stranger; to be naked, sick or imprisoned. Love recognises this. For example, when Jesus said that the dead would hear the voice of the Son of God and would thereby live, he did not just mean that he would call dead Lazarus out of his tomb back into life. He meant that he would call people from a way of living that was for all intents and purposes a life of death – and raise them into life with purpose, joy and hope. He meant that he would, in the end, raise all the dead out of their graves to stand before him on the Last Day to see what (if any) gracious good use they had made of the life they were given whilst they were on earth.

Christ's description of the Last Judgement in both St Matthew's and St John's gospels about doing good does not contradict his teaching that we are saved by faith in the name of the Son of God. It simply means that faith, if it is alive, necessarily expresses itself in love. I cannot say 'I love God' and then not show love to my neighbour. To quote our Lord again, 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven; but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Mt 7. 21). The will of the Father is love; and indeed, God is love.

The question at the Last Judgement is: Did we do those good works that God prepared us to do? Faith without good works is dead.

By taking our nature; by living human life as it was created to be lived; by reaching out to us in love and mercy; by speaking stern judgement to the selfish, the proud and the unkind, Jesus as the Son of Man clearly *identifies with us in our need*, and especially with those who are most in need, the 'least of these'. As he does this, he takes personally and receives our works of love on the one hand, or our unkindness

on the other. If we do these acts to the least of these, we do them, so far as Christ is concerned, to him; and if we neglect the least of these, we neglect him.

St Martin of Tours, when he was a Roman soldier preparing for Christian Baptism in the 4th century, was approached on a bitterly cold day by a poor man who asked him for alms in the name of Christ. Drawing his sword, Martin cut off one-half of his military cloak and gave it to the beggar. Some bystanders laughed at Martin's now odd appearance; and others were ashamed at not relieving the poor man's misery. That night in a dream, Christ appeared to Martin, clothed with his torn cloak, saying to him, 'Martin covered me with this garment'. The next morning, Martin's cloak was fully restored to him as if the tearing of the cloak had never happened.

Acts like those of St Martin are the daily works which God's grace has prepared for us accomplish for him daily. Our walk with God is actually quite a trip; it is a pilgrimage; it is an adventure in providence. You and I can start a day full of our own plans, and suddenly discover that God has quite different plans in store for us. But that is all right. If we accept to walk in God's ways, all will be well. The truly important duties of the day will be done.

When we come to the end of our pilgrimage and to the end of our adventure in grace, we will find that Christ the King, when he judges our use of the time and talents he has given us, was with us all along. From the beginning, love has been the true expression of faith. Love is the judge in the Last Judgement. Love is the criterion. And love is the last word from Christ our King: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'

Amen.