

Christ the King (Cycle A)

November 20, 2011 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

-- William Butler Yeats, 1919

Today we're going to talk a little about the Second Coming. Not the disturbing imagery in Yeats' poem, but the only slightly less disturbing imagery of Matthew's Gospel.

Today we are at the end of a Liturgical Cycle, and almost the at the end of our church year. Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. When we began on the first Sunday of Advent a year ago, we were admonished to stay awake, watching for the coming of our Savior at a time that no one can know – the meeting of heaven and earth at the end of time. On this last Sunday of the liturgical year, we also look forward to our Savior coming, but now it is at the end of time, whether it be at our death (the end of time for us), or the end of the world. It is that time when Christ will come in all his glory, his Kingship made known to all.

Back in May, there was a Christian broadcaster named Harold Camping who predicted that the end of the world was coming, on a date certain – May 21. May 21 passed without incident. Then he recalculated and discovered his mistake. The real day was October 21. Needless to say, I don't recall any unusual happenings on October 21.

When I was in college, I had a friend whose father wrote a book that included a prediction of the end of the world on a particular date. We had an "End of the World" party at their house, and went up on the sundeck on the roof at midnight to watch the end of the world. I guess we would have felt pretty silly if the world actually had ended that night. At least for a few minutes.

Although it may not be obvious, our first reading from Ezekiel would be called apocalyptic literature – writing that focuses on the end of things. Its purpose is not to frighten people, but to give hope – to make the people feel better – that their struggles will come to an end. We often see apocalyptic literature when people are suffering or in turmoil.

Maybe that's why there is so much apocalyptic literature today, especially in the fundamentalist groups. Maybe it's because we live in a time when hope is difficult to find. It can make the world

hard to live in. Our world has not seen peace for over fifty years. All over the world people see wars and violence and conflict. Apocalyptic literature provides that beacon of hope that all will be well, or at least that our suffering will soon be at an end.

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel should give us hope. Remember "the two greatest commandments on which the whole law and the prophets depend." The standard of judgment comes down to the two great commandments – not just how we behaved, but how we treated other people.

All year we've been examining the teachings of Jesus about the Kingdom of heaven. The last few months, all of the parables been parables and metaphors for the kingdom of heaven. The message of Jesus was that the kingdom of heaven is open to us right now, here on earth. He gave us ways to participate in the kingdom of heaven, summarized by the Beatitudes and the two great commandments.

The last few weeks we have been given parables that touch on the end of our days in this kingdom on earth, and that time when all things will be united in Christ. Each year we celebrate much the same pattern over a different three year cycle of readings. But I wanted you to see the overall picture, that there is a rhyme and reason for the readings at Mass, and there is a progression to the readings.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, the feast of Christ the King. The concept of King is hard for us to imagine, as Americans who have never lived under a kingship. But we usually have some idea of what that might mean. It's interesting, though . . . all the readings today on the feast of Christ the King do not stress that ruler, authority figure, 'divine right' sort of person. Instead they look on the Lord as a shepherd, a much more pastoral and gentle image of God, used many times in the

scriptures. God is not seen as the conquering ruler coming in glory to claim the spoils of victory. Not a warrior king, but a shepherd.

The image of an all-powerful king inspires fear, awe, respect and terror. The image of a shepherd calls to mind images of kindness, love, caring, one who is the pastor of his flock. A true King would be caring, with an open and loving heart, someone who rules the people with justice.

To the Hebrews, justice didn't mean what it means to us today. We think of justice as the good being rewarded and the evil being punished. But for the Hebrews, it's deeper than that. Justice means that everything is in the right order, the right relationship of all things. All things are in sync. Sort of a cosmic Feng Shui.

On this last day of the church year then, take time to think about your own life. How disordered has your life been? Have you been placing too much effort in the wrong places?

Judgment, salvation and condemnation: Jesus reminds us many times in the Gospels of the contrast between this time of liberty of action, and the impending judgment that awaits each person.

There is an essential lesson we must learn if we are to serve Christ as faithful subjects while on earth and so come into our eternal kingdom when we die. We serve him, he tells us himself today, by serving his needy members. These we will always have with us, so that we shall never be short of the opportunity to show our love and gratitude to Christ.

The hungry, sick, naked, imprisoned provide us with opportunities for serving Christ. There are hundreds of opportunities to serve those in need of the corporal works of mercy. We must be

generous not only with our treasure, but with our time and talent as well.

It is true that we are weak and sinful; but we are also capable and strong. There is a clear difference between someone who completes his task, with errors along the way, and someone whose whole life consists of fundamental errors. We are all sinners, but some of us sin in life while fulfilling our task, and others have only their sins to show.

We are called to a personal responsibility to grow and internalize the truth of the Gospel and of grace in this life. Some people will remain willfully unaware of this basic human task – I think of it as “Invincible Ignorance.” By their own choice, they make themselves unfit for the Kingdom of God.

On this feast of Christ our King, as our liturgical year draws to a close, we renew our pledge of loyalty to Him. So that this pledge will not be an empty formula, we resolve to take seriously the spiritual and corporal works of mercy and see how well we put them into practice. If we have failed in the past, we resolve to begin again today. Old Mongolian Proverb: No matter how far you have gone down the wrong road . . . turn around.

But don't get discouraged. Remember that we have the shepherd watching over us, helping us on to the right paths, caring for us and providing for us. His message is “put your hope in him, and think about others” and that is how we will reach the kingdom of heaven at the end of our time on earth. We mustn't get caught being unprepared. We know what is expected of us. Our job is to do it.

READINGS

Reading 1 Ez 34:11-12, 15-17

Thus says the Lord GOD:
I myself will look after and tend my sheep.
As a shepherd tends his flock
when he finds himself among his scattered sheep,
so will I tend my sheep.
I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered
when it was cloudy and dark.
I myself will pasture my sheep;
I myself will give them rest, says the Lord GOD.
The lost I will seek out,
the strayed I will bring back,
the injured I will bind up,
the sick I will heal,
but the sleek and the strong I will destroy,
shepherding them rightly.

As for you, my sheep, says the Lord GOD,
I will judge between one sheep and another,
between rams and goats.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6

R. (1) **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**
The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

In verdant pastures he gives me repose.

R. **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

Beside restful waters he leads me;
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me in right paths
for his name's sake.

R. **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

You spread the table before me
in the sight of my foes;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

R. **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

Only goodness and kindness follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
for years to come.

R. **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

Reading 2 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28

Brothers and sisters:
Christ has been raised from the dead,
the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.
For since death came through man,
the resurrection of the dead came also through man.
For just as in Adam all die,
so too in Christ shall all be brought to life,
but each one in proper order:
Christ the firstfruits;
then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ;
then comes the end,
when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father,
when he has destroyed every sovereignty
and every authority and power.
For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.
The last enemy to be destroyed is death.
When everything is subjected to him,
then the Son himself will also be subjected
to the one who subjected everything to him,
so that God may be all in all.

Gospel Mt 25:31-46

Jesus said to his disciples:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory,
and all the angels with him,
he will sit upon his glorious throne,
and all the nations will be assembled before him.
And he will separate them one from another,
as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.
He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.
Then the king will say to those on his right,
'Come, you who 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 drink,
a stranger and you welcomed me,
naked and you clothed me,
ill and you cared for me,
in prison and you visited me.'
Then the righteous will answer him and say,
'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,
or thirsty and give you drink?
When did we see you a stranger and welcome you,
or naked and clothe you?
When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'
And the king will say to them in reply,
'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did
for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me.'
Then he will say to those on his left,
'Depart from me, you accursed,
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 no drink,
a stranger and you gave me no welcome,
naked and you gave me no clothing,
ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.'
Then they will answer and say,
'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison,
and not minister to your needs?'
He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you,
what you did not do for one of these least ones,
you did not do for me.'
And these will go off to eternal punishment,
but the righteous to eternal life."