

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

November 23, 2008

Proper 29A 2008

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost – marks the end the Church's yearly calendar – and it ends with a bang! Our readings are apocalyptic. They envisage the end of times and the final judgment day and they bring home two truths we try to teach our young people: 1. that our decisions and actions have real consequences and 2. that our material world is part of and connected to a larger spiritual reality.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is from the book of Ezekiel. It is a strange book full of fantastic visions, challenging imagery and prophetic judgments. In some Jewish traditions, only men are permitted to read the book and, then, not until they have attained the age of 30. Ezekiel was both a priest and a prophet who prophesied before and during the Babylonian captivity. Prior to the fall of Jerusalem, his words were words of judgment against the rulers of Judea who did not care for the people but rather oppressed them and enriched themselves by impoverishing the people. After Jerusalem fell, his words were words of encouragement and promise that God would once again deliver the suffering and punish the wicked.

In today's lesson, God is envisaged as the shepherd of Judea. The previous shepherds, Judea's kings and rulers, got fat eating the food but did not feed the sheep. Rather than defending Israel, they caused its collapse and the dispersal of its people throughout the Mediterranean or into captivity. God will collect the scattered sheep

and bring them to their own rich land where he will care for them. Ezekiel prophesies that the bad shepherds will be judged and punished by God and that God will set over them one caring shepherd from the line of David, the king most favored by God. It is a vision that will carry us into Advent next Sunday.

In our gospel lesson, Matthew envisages Christ coming as a king to sit on the throne of his glory to judge. As a good shepherd would do at the end of the day, he separates the goats from the sheep. He invites the sheep on his right in the kingdom prepared for them because they are blessed by the Father. To the goats on his left, he casts them out in damnation to eternal torment. Matthew is very fond of weeping and the gnashing of teeth. What I found interesting was that both the sheep and the goats were clueless at the judgment received. The sheep couldn't think of anything special they had done. Jesus tells them that the ordinary things they did – giving someone a glass of water or a coat, welcoming the stranger or visiting the sick – become extraordinary when done with love – with understanding and simple compassion. Not the warm and fuzzy love, but love as in truly seeing the Christ in all humanity and compassionately identifying with the other. The goats were astounded because they bore the poor or suffering no ill feelings; it was just none of their business. They didn't see the connection.

Jesus, in this his last great teaching before his own death, is using apocalyptic language of the Hebrew Scriptures. This kind of literature arises in times of great stress and terrifying events. It is about endings, which are always fearful in one sense or another, but it is also about God's faithfulness and deliverance of God's people. Perhaps Jesus' listeners were thinking of the end of Roman rule and oppression. But

by placing this lesson at the end of Jesus' final discourse, Matthew is asking us to look through the cross to the Resurrection and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Yes, all those Doomsday people are right. Someday the Earth and the entire universe will indeed cease to exist. Someday all living things will die. But endings are also beginnings. Yes, the kingdom of God is imagined as Christ coming out of the clouds on that last day, but Jesus' words also tell us that the kingdom is also now and we can do something about it. Jesus identifies with all humanity, but here especially with the suffering and most vulnerable. By seeing the Christ in the other and treating the other as we would Christ we live into the Kingdom.

It is all about attitude – can we see through the cross and see and believe in God's faithfulness and deliverance? Can we see beyond the endings and see the new beginnings? Those are very real questions to ask in our current perilous economic times. Jesus' listeners may have been thinking of the end of Rome and return to the days of old just as many are thinking of the Dow returning to 14,000 and \$1.00/gal. gas! But the beginning that Jesus talks about is not a return to the old sense of normalcy, but the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Nowhere in the three synoptic gospels does Jesus say that you get into the kingdom by accepting him as our personal savior. Nowhere does he say that churchgoing would make us sheep. Nowhere does he say that by believing or professing a particular creed we get to be shep the king approves of. No, it is having love that we are saved. Not love as a "concept" or emotion, not "love of neighbor" unremoved from the realities of life. No, it is acting and doing love and being love-in-action that makes us sheep. This, too, is an important lesson for us in these times.

We are not called to be perfect; we live in an imperfect world. The examples Jesus gives are not heroic. The sheep are clueless because they are such ordinary little kindnesses. What makes them important is the love that generated them. Going to church is good; I encourage it. But it is being Church that matters – being the Body of Christ in the world and seeing the Christ in the other.

This challenges us to break down barriers and it challenges us to take risks. It challenges us to see the world with new hearts. That is what the Church is for – we are in the change and transformation business and it starts with us!