

# The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

(Year A)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17   |
| <i>Response</i>           | The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.   |
| <i>Psalm</i>              | Psalm 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6  |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28  |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!<br>Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | Matthew 25:31-46  |

Well we've come to the end, the final Sunday of Ordinary Time for the year of Matthew's Gospel, Year A. And in this case, the year ends with a very important solemnity. It is the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, which is commonly referred to as the Solemnity of Christ the King. The year in this sense ends not with the passion and death of Christ, as the Gospel of Matthew does, but with Jesus' final teaching from his public ministry. So just a note there, it is important to emphasize that in Ordinary Time what we are doing is we are traveling alongside Jesus throughout his public life, throughout his public ministry. And therefore it's fitting that the Church would end the liturgical year of Ordinary Time with the final words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew in the discourse of Matthew 25, which is called the eschatological discourse. It is Jesus' discourse on the end, on the final judgment and the second coming.

So we've seen a couple of parables already about the end, like the parable of the ten virgins or the parable of the talents, which are really focused on the final judgment and the coming of Christ at the end of time, and the same theme continues with this Sunday, the Solemnity of Christ the King, with the famous parable of the so-called sheep and goats. It's Jesus's depiction of the final judgment in terms of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. So we will read this parable and then we will try to unpack it and link it in a special way to the Church's doctrines on heaven and hell, which are very important, very central doctrines rooted in the Scriptures themselves.

So let's read the parable and put it in its original context. Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus says this at the end of his famous discourse:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of 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, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, 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, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so what's being described here? Well although we call this a parable, it's a little different than some of the other parables we've been looking at in Matthew's Gospel. It's not a long story, it's really almost more of a short analogy where Jesus is briefly comparing his *parousia*, his second coming in the final judgment at the end of time, with the separation of sheep and goats by a shepherd. So the opening lines of the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

parable make clear that that's the context. First, when it says “when the Son of Man comes in glory,” Jesus is talking about his final advent, his final coming at the end of time. Second, when it talks about all the nations being gathered before him, that's describing the final judgment. The final judgment is at the end of time when all of the dead will be raised, and not only the Israelites, but every nation, every people under heaven, everyone who has ever lived from the beginning of time until the end of time will be judged by the Lord in what the Church refers to as the general judgment or the final judgment. So Jesus makes clear from the beginning of this parable that that's what he's actually talking. He's talking about the coming of the Son of Man at the final judgment.

And in that context, he uses the analogy of a shepherd separating the sheep and the goats as a metaphor for the final separation of the righteous, who will inherit everlasting life, and the wicked, who will inherit everlasting punishment. So the imagery here is not an accident because if you look at sheep and goats, one of the things you will notice about the two animals is that they have very different, so to speak, personalities. Sheep are, as a rule, docile to the master. They follow the shepherd, they follow his voice, they flock together, they are docile creatures. Goats — and if you ever had a goat you would know — are stubborn, as a rule they are very stubborn animals. So even with the imagery here of sheep and goats, you can kind of already get a sense of what the difference between the righteous and the wicked are. The righteous are those who are obedient to the Lord, who are docile to the will of God; whereas the goats, the wicked, are those who are prideful, who are stubborn and who have refused to do the will of God. Jesus doesn't make that explicit, but it is just kind of implicit in the language and imagery of sheep and goats. So he puts the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left hand, and then he begins to pronounce judgment.

So the judgment of the sheep is “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” This is interesting. So a few elements here. First, salvation is a blessing. It's a gift of God. That is why he calls them “blessed of my Father.” Second, it's described in terms of inheriting the kingdom. So notice — my English teachers always used to tell me don't mix your metaphors — that Jesus is mixing his metaphors here. On the one hand he is using an image, a metaphor of sheep and goats and a shepherd, separating them, and in the very same parable he's also using the metaphor of a king giving an inheritance to his

subjects. So they are inheriting the kingdom of God, which it says here “was prepared from the foundation of the world.” So this isn’t an ordinary kingdom, this is an eternal kingdom. In other words, God has known from the very first day of creation, from the beginning of time, those who would inherit eternal life. This is called the doctrine of providence, that God knows all things. He's not surprised by how things will turn out at the final judgment. He knows everything that has ever happened or ever will happen until the end of time. This is his divine foreknowledge and also his divine providence, that he's been guiding it and preparing for it from the foundation of the world.

Now, the question everyone wants to ask though is how do I get into the kingdom? What's the condition for entering into the kingdom? And in this parable Jesus says something that might be shocking, it might be a little striking to us. We can imagine him saying enter into the kingdom, inherit the kingdom all of those of you who believed in me or who accepted me as the Messiah. You would think that he might put faith as a condition for entering into the kingdom, and we'll see elsewhere that knowing Christ is an essential aspect of entering into the kingdom. We saw that earlier in some of the parables. But in this parable the emphasis falls on what the Church calls the corporal works of mercy. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, visiting the sick, caring for those who are in need; these corporal works of mercy, welcoming the stranger, what does that mean? It means in particular sojourners, immigrants. So in the first century A.D., when a person would immigrate from another country into the holy land, they were essentially bereft of the protections, the ordinary protections, of family, friends, employment and those kind of things. So God made very clear to the people in the Old Testament that they were to welcome the stranger and not to abuse the stranger or abuse the immigrant or the alien or the person from another country.

So what Jesus is saying here is that all those works of mercy, what we call the corporal works of mercy, when you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. Now that is a fascinating verse. It's been made famous by Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, who as their mission have the care for the poor and the needy. And Mother Teresa very famously said that those five words were kind of the essence of her mission and ministry: you did it to me. When Jesus says that he tells us everything we need to know about the poor and the lowly, namely that any act of charity done to the poor is in essence an act of charity done to Christ

himself. It's a kind of mystical theology of the poor as living members of the body of Christ. So Jesus says when you have done it to the least of these my brethren, the sick, the imprisoned, the naked, the hungry, you actually did this to me. So the reward for those acts of mercy is to enter into the kingdom of God. And the parable ends by saying that the righteous will enter into eternal life. So that's another image for not just the kingdom of heaven, but what the Greek says here is *zōēn aiōnion*. We get the word zoology from that, the study of life. *Zōēn aiōnion* is a life that lasts forever, it's the life of the age to come, eternal life. That is the sheep.

What about the goats? This one is somewhat less positive. The goats who were placed on the left side are not blessed but cursed. In other words, they were punished for their sins. “Depart from me, you cursed,” he says “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” So instead of being saved and inheriting the kingdom, they are damned. They enter into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. That's a very important point there. You can see Jesus teaching that the fallen angels are themselves separated from God for all eternity. An the image that he uses to describe the pain of that separation is the image of eternal fire. This obviously, in this context here, would refer to a kind of spiritual fire, because the angels don't have bodies, but they're experiencing in some way, in some mysterious way, the pain of being separated from God for all eternity. And in this case, it is very sobering, Jesus says that the damned are separated from God, but in a sense are joined to the devil and his angels. Their lot is with the devil and his angels in this eternal fire. Again, this is part of divine providence, it has been prepared by God from the very foundation of the world and now it is being brought to culmination at the final judgment.

So you might want to ask yourself here, what's the reason? What do I need to do to avoid experiencing this eternal separation from God? I always like to joke with my students, if you're at the final judgment and you see two lines, get in the sheep line, don't get in the goat line. But obviously that's just a joke here, the judgement is already decided on the basis of the actions by which we have lived our lives. And in this case, the goats, again it doesn't say they are adulterers, it doesn't say they are murderers, it doesn't say that they are idolaters or any of those positive sins that we would normally associate with grave sin — and rightly, those are definitely described as grave sins in the Old Testament and in New Testament — but what is described here, and this is really shocking, is sins of omission. Namely, that unlike the sheep, the goats here fail to perform the works of mercy, the corporal works of mercy, to feed

the hungry, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, to visit those who are sick or in prison, to give water to the thirsty. So that's the only thing described here; it is that they did not do those things to the least of Jesus' brethren, and so as a result Jesus says when you fail to do that to them, you also fail to do that to me. In other words, when you fail to love your neighbor, you actually fail to love God. It's a very sobering, very important principle of the law of Christ in the New Testament. In fact, the Letter of John basically says that, that he who hates his neighbor cannot love God. The love of God is not abiding in the heart of someone who hates his neighbor, because every human being, even the most poor, the most lowly, the naked, the homeless, the mentally ill, the prisoners, whoever they are, they are made in the image and likeness of God. So if we fail to love them, we also fail to love God. And that failure in charity is really the essential dimension of being excluded from the kingdom of God. And so Christ says here that the wicked enter into "eternal punishment," whereas the righteous go off into "eternal life." Now that's the basic thrust of the parable here.

What about the Old Testament reading? How does this link up with the first reading for today? Well if you go back here, it is a very famous prophecy from the book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 34, Ezekiel himself gives a kind of parable of the divine shepherd. He is describing the future age of salvation using the metaphor of God as a shepherd. And this is what he says:

For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

And then it skips down a few verses:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice. "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, rams and he-goats.

So notice that. Where did Jesus get this image of the judgment as a division between sheep and goats? He got it from the Old Testament. He got it from Ezekiel 34. And this prophecy reveals something extremely important about God — I really want to stress this — the image of God as the shepherd doesn't just mean that he is the final judge — like the shepherd judges between the sheep and the goats and divides them. That is true, but it also implies, in some ways even more importantly, that as a shepherd he has the sheep's best interest in mind. In other words, he himself, he says, is going to seek out the loss. He's going to seek out the strayed. He is going to bind up the crippled, because that's what a shepherd does. He tries to save his sheep, so that if they get lost, if they get scattered, he brings them back to the flock. So the image of God as a shepherd shows that not only does God call us to love him and to love one another, but that he loved us first, that he sought us out first. That when it comes to salvation, God was seeking us long before we ever sought him. That's the fundamental imagery here. In fact, it is kind of interesting, in the Revised Standard Version translation it says “I will rescue them on a day of clouds and thick darkness.” That image is really powerful because if you think about the New Testament, what is the day of clouds and thick darkness? Well it's Good Friday. It's the day when there is darkness for three hours, from noon until 3 o'clock, when Jesus gives up his life on the cross in the crucifixion. That's how God rescues us. He rescues us through the cross.

And that's why, you can see, the Responsorial Psalm for today is the famous Psalm 23. What's the Psalm?

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;  
he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Now look at what it says here:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

So notice how that Psalm ends, it ends with an emphasis on eternal life, on dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. In other words, in being in the presence of God forever and ever and ever. And that's really the essence of eternal life, it is eternal communion with the shepherd who loved us so much that he gave his very life, he gave himself, so that we might be saved from sin and death and hell, and we might enter into the glory and the joy of eternal life. In closing here I'd like to just end with a couple points not from the living tradition this time, I don't want to quote one of the Church Fathers, I want quote the Catechism of the Catholic Church. And one of the reasons I'm doing that is because in our day and time a lot of people just don't believe in hell anymore, and also a lot of people don't believe in heaven anymore. As secularism rises and as atheism and agnosticism spread, one of the first things to go is the belief in the supernatural, belief in eternal life; whether it's eternal union with God in heaven or eternal separation from God in hell. I just want to point out here that Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats should make very clear where he stands on the reality of heaven and the reality of hell. These are his last words in his public ministry, and they are a teaching about the reality of the final judgment and heaven and hell. And if you don't believe in those things, it is really going to affect every decision you make in your life, it is going to change the way you live your daily life. So it is important to note that in the official teaching of the Church that's given to us in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church reaffirms three things. First, number one, in paragraph 544 it emphasizes that Jesus identifies himself with the poor and that our love for the poor is an essential part of our spiritual life. So in paragraph 544, the Catechism says this:

Jesus identifies himself with the poor of every kind and makes active love toward them the condition for entering his kingdom.

That's a very strong statement. Jesus identifies with the poor and he makes our love for the poor a condition of entering into the kingdom of God. So there shouldn't be any debate about that. Our expression of love for the poor through works of charity,

especially corporal works of mercy, is a condition for entering the kingdom. That is the first point. The second point. The Church is very clear, on the other hand, about the reality of hell. If you look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1033, not only does the Church affirm the reality of hell, but it bases its teaching about hell on the parable of the sheep and the goats, on Jesus' own words. So this is what the Catechism says on paragraph 1033:

We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves

And then it actually quotes the passage I was alluding to earlier, 1 John 3:14-15

"He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren. [Matt 25:31-46, the sheep and the goats] To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."

So notice here two things. First, the Church is very clear that we can't be united with God unless we freely love him. In other words, God respects our freedom. If we don't love him and we don't want to be with him forever and ever, he will respect that. And that state, second, of self exclusion — which is what it really is, it is us choosing not to love God — from his eternal love is by definition hell. That's what we mean when we say hell. So it's important to note that because sometimes people can think of God as like thrusting us into hell against our will. That's just not the teaching of the Church. The Church is very clear that because heaven is nothing other than our loving God for all eternity, and him loving us, that eternal exchange of love, that hell by definition is also nothing other than our refusing to love God and therefore being separated from him for all eternity. So it really is important to see that. And all of that is based on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and goats.

But the parable of the sheep and the goats — someone pointed this out to me recently — does not end with hell. Jesus talks about hell but he always ends with the reality of heaven. So he also says “but the righteous” will enter “into eternal life.” So the Church also has a teaching on the reality of heaven. This is what the Catechism says about heaven. Listen to this. Paragraphs 1023-1024, what is heaven? What is it like?

Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they "see him as he is," face to face...This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity - this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed - is called "heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.

And that's really what it's all about, happiness. Jesus' first words in Matthew's Gospel on the mount of Beatitudes, in his first sermon, were the Beatitudes, happy are the poor in spirit, they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. And his last words in the parable of the sheep of the goats are enter into the joy of your Father's kingdom. So those two words, happiness and joy, are like bookends to Jesus' teaching, because ultimately he came into this world to teach us how to be happy and to lead us to the state of supreme definitive happiness, which is heaven itself. So I don't know about you, but I would like to be happy forever. I would love to enter into that eternal joy were I will be in communion not just with God, but with the Virgin Mary, with all the saints, with all the angels and all the blessed in an eternal banquet, an eternal kingdom of joy and peace and happiness. That's really what heaven is, and so the Church brings the liturgical year, Ordinary Time, to an end by setting our sights on our eternal destiny, by setting our sights on the fact that not only is the Lord Jesus Christ the King of the universe, but that at the end of time we have to make a decision about whether we are going to spend eternity with him or without him. The parable of the sheep and the goats exhorts us, it calls us to live lives of love now, to love our neighbor now, especially the poor, so that we might love our neighbor and God forever in his eternal kingdom of Heaven.