

## **Sermon – November 26, 2023**

### **When Did We See You?**

**Text: Matthew 25: 31-46**

Prayer: O Wise Spirit, empower us to live in light of the gospel, declaring its truth with our words, and embodying this truth through our actions. Amen.

In the early 1920's, there was a huge rise in secularism in the aftermath of World War I in which people lived their lives as if God did not exist. Dictatorial governments flourished and people were mass murdered by oppressive leaders. Those of the Christian faith began to doubt the authority and existence of Jesus Christ. There was a huge dissension against the Roman Catholic Church and people questioned the power of the Church to continue using Christ's authority. Pope Pius XI felt the need for a feast celebrating the kingship of Jesus Christ over all humanity especially at a time when respect for Christ and for the Church was declining rapidly. In 1925, Pope Pius XI assumed as his papal motto "Pax Christi in Regno Christi," translated as "The Peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ." He then proclaimed the Celebration of the Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe known, today as Christ the King Sunday, or in some denominations like ours, The Reign of Christ Sunday. Pope Pius XI wanted to name Christ as King to remind Christians that their allegiance must remain in Christ – the true king, as opposed to any earthly rulers.

I'm sure, that some of us are not comfortable with the image of Jesus as a king especially when it is understood to be an imperial title, or a monarch who could easily use his power in oppressing people; or someone who is detached and remote from the realities of the everyday world. My personal understanding of Jesus is not one who is "high and mighty" but rather one "among the least", the compassionate one, the one who lived humbly as a servant-leader. Instead of calling Jesus a king, I would rather describe him as "kin" to all. A brother or a friend or a neighbour - one who is among us.

A theologian once proclaimed that Matthew is known to have portrayed the non-violent Jesus through violent parables, where those who do not abide by the “law” are thrown into damnation. We have heard those parables in the last couple of Sundays and today, Matthew spins off again with another problematic parable by creating a spectacular scene in his depiction of the Judgment Day. The Son of Man interpreted by many to be Jesus the Christ sits on a throne as a “king” surrounded by angels in glory. According to Nancy Rockwell, *“Matthew tells a story of Jesus holding up the Great Sorting of the sheep and the goats, a vision shown in the art and architecture of the great cathedrals of the world, where Christ sits enthroned, passing judgment on people endlessly, sorting us into heaven and hell based on our deeds. All the people, young and old alike are in the divine court waiting for their verdict.”* Jesus was biasedly portrayed as The Judge who is a sorter and a separator. He separates each human being - the blessed, rewarded sheep to his right side, and the accursed punished goats to the left. It is a gathering which is both disturbing and fearful. For the expert farmer who understands the life of farm animals, they would know that sheep and goats live as one herd, eating the same grass, following the same shepherds, enduring the same weather, giving birth in the same perils and dying under similar conditions. As do human beings. Stop for a moment and ask yourself if you can relate as to how the word judgement or judging or being judged is used in this parable. I think some of us might agree that it is harsh and discriminatory. Who wants to be judged anyway?

This parable also nudges us to choose. Which team would you prefer to be on? Team sheep or Team goat? It’s like asking them – Ottawa Sens or Maple Leafs? The Eagles or the Patriots? And the separation is put in place. Do you see yourself in this story? Once a young person approached me with this question: If the king in the parable is Jesus, how could he judge the goats harshly? Weren’t they also human beings that need forgiveness? Won’t God give us all second chances? In other words, is it fair for the

goats to be damned for the eternal fire, while the sheep on the right are rewarded with a life in paradise? Matthew for sure is giving us a hint here – choose to be on the Sheep team – where there’s free all you-can-eat buffet, an all-expenses paid resort and a lifetime membership at Eternity Salon. Matthew makes it exciting for us to be on the sheep team. It is easy for some of us to dissect the whole story into many parts instead of looking into the whole picture. Because for me, the focus of Matthew’s story is not the separation of the people whether they are sheep or goats. Rather, the focus of this story is the **criteria of judgment** which calls for radical actions.

The separation is caused by cups of water offered to the thirsty and peanut butter sandwiches given to the hungry. It's about visits to the imprisoned, and a greeting for a stranger. People who do such things will play on the sheep team, where the marks of approval are out of this world. But here’s the clincher - the sheep have no clue why they are earning heaven by their actions. They had no idea that their good deeds meant that they were spreading God’s reign in the world. They weren’t trying to earn God’s favour or rewards for themselves. They just saw people in need, and they helped them. They were just living their lives of faith the way that they always did. They are genuinely loving their neighbour, and genuinely serving the needs of others, instead of selfishly looking out for themselves. It was part of their innate nature to love and help and care and support.

The “goats” on the other hand are those who are aware of hungry people and let hungry them go hungry. They never bother giving thirsty people anything to drink. They completely ignore strangers, letting them know that they are absolutely unwelcome. And they never give clothes to people who need them, don’t visit the sick and lonely, and let people rot in jail or prison without a thought. They can be seen as callous, indifferent and with an “I-don’t-care” attitude. Like the sheep, the goats didn’t even realize that they

were supposed to reach out and help and love and support. It was not on their radar and live their lives without any care of what's happening around them.

Yet still more surprising, according to the parable, is Jesus Christ' identification with the needy ones. Christ is the recipient of the acts of kindness, justice and compassion. "I was hungry and you fed me... I was sick and you took care of me...I was in prison and you visited me." When we hear it, we are surprised, just like the sheep and the goats in the story, for we know perfectly well that we never saw the Christ hungry, never even imagined that there could be any need or want that went unmet. "When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or a stranger or in prison?" we asked. Christ's answer is clear. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." How do we meet this Christ? Well, I'm sure it would be difficult for us to find him in palaces, or in mansions or in our comfort zones. He is there lurking in the margins. Sometimes, you might even struggle to find him in cathedrals or in churches. But I'm quite certain that he will be found mostly in the places of need and emptiness; those places where there is hurt, pain or indifference - places of poverty, violence and injustices.

In early 2013, Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz, a devout Catholic from Ontario unveiled "Homeless Jesus," a bronze sculpture depicting Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench. Schmalz installed the original sculpture at Regis College, University of Toronto, and since then, replicas of his work have been installed worldwide including the Vatican. The sculpture is designed portraying Jesus huddled beneath a blanket, his face and hands obscured. Only the crucifixion wounds on his feet reveal his identity. Schmalz describes the sculpture as a "visual translation" of our Gospel reading for this week, in which Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, and then tells his followers: "Whatever you did to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

This type of imagery speaks to me, portraying Christ as someone journeying among us. Indeed, he declares that his sisters and brothers are the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the prisoners, the homeless. They are the people we can easily pass by and easily ignore.

- a lonely child begging to be hugged;
- a confused woman sitting slumped over on a park bench;
- a dirty-faced man looking for a shelter to spend the night in,
- an elderly person waiting for someone to help him cross the street;
- a couple grieving the loss of their child;
- or the rich person who felt insecure and helpless.

Or those we know quite well. Our family and friends who are near and dear to us.

Here's what we should remember. There is a sheep and a goat in each of us. We want to do more for others, but this world has become a place of unwanted sufferings. We cannot overwhelmingly change the world, but we can respond in a way that makes a difference. Start from simple ways – hug your children, offer help when needed, give to the food bank, pray for the sick and the lonely, support SOSA's projects, visit a grieving person, sign a petition. That means we have to live differently right where we are because to be deeply involved with others is to profess that we are all connected in our predicaments and we are somehow linked together in ways we cannot even understand.

Soon, we will enter Advent, a season of waiting, longing, and listening. In the midst of all these predicaments, Advent will come to us whether you and I choose to be a sheep or a goat. But this we know: in Advent's coming, a vulnerable Child will be born, with the light of God in him, the flame of peace warm in him, and the love of God pouring forth to us. And we will all be given a chance to respond, in the winter of the world, to attend to the needy, to the homeless, to the marginalized, to the unloveables. Truly, the reign of Christ is the reign of hope, peace, joy and love and Christ reigns forever! Amen.