

“THE SHEPHERD KING”

a sermon on Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:33-46
November 26, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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So in case you missed it, *one* of our readings last Sunday didn't really fit in with the “theme” for day, and I chose not to address it in my sermon. As it happens, that reading – which was the Gospel lesson from Matthew – was the only reading I chose to actually include from the lectionary texts for the day.

The lectionary, after all, is *optional* in our tradition. And it just doesn't *always* speak to the moment – particularly when, as last week, our focus was our *national* Thanksgiving celebration, and the New Revised Common Lectionary isn't just an *American* document. At the same time, since we are coming to the end of Lectionary year “A” for which Matthew is the primary Gospel, I thought it was important to include the reading in the service, even though I didn't address it.

That reading, as a reminder, was the verses immediately *preceding* today's Gospel lesson. We know it as “the parable of the talents” – familiar words of Jesus, actually, used by the Church over the centuries to motivate Christians to *use* the “gifts” God has given us for the sake of the Kingdom. I have heard – and for that matter, I have *preached* – many sermons on that parable over of the years.

But the Lectionary reading was the *full* text of the parable, which also includes a final verse that we generally omit – a verse that says (regarding the servant who simply buried his talent in the ground to ensure its safekeeping rather than even investing it, let alone “trading” with it as the others did): “cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.” Harsh words that sound so uncharacteristically harsh and judgmental on Jesus' part.

The Lectionary Gospel readings for last *couple* of weeks, as a matter of fact, have really been leading us this day. Today, on the Church calendar, is “Christ the King” Sunday – the *final* Sunday of the year, which is a time to put the whole year's observances and celebrations into *context* before we start the whole journey over again beginning with the first Sunday of Advent next week.

And so this morning, I want to consider both last week's Gospel lesson as well as the one that preceded it (which was the parable of the wise and foolish maidens) in addition to *today's* lesson – which includes another exceedingly well

known and used set of verses about the “least of these,” cited many, many times as a motivation to go out into the world and “do good,” but that *also* includes words of judgement, and a final verse (often omitted when we read the passage) in which Jesus states: “these (that is, the ones who do *not* feed the hungry, and clothe the naked) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

The key to understanding *all three* of these teachings is taking into account their context in the Gospel narrative. All of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have a section that is “apocalyptic” in nature and in writing style. Apocalyptic literature, you might recall, was a popular genre in Israel – and in fact, throughout the middle east. It was actually much more than just a literary category. It was a whole “philosophy” and even a “world view.”

The people of Israel first encountered Apocalypticism in the days of their exile in Babylon. And it *explained* so much. It held that human history occurs in “eras,” and that while in the current “era,” the forces of evil and injustice appear to be winning out over what is good and right, there is a “cosmic reordering” of the universe on the horizon, at which time God will “set things right,” and initiate a new era – when peace and justice will once again reign supreme.

In apocalyptic thought, God’s *judgement* was simply *assumed* as part of that re-ordering process.

The apocalyptic sections of the synoptic Gospels come in the midst of the last week of Jesus’ life – *after* his triumphal entry into Jerusalem – when, whereas the crowds had at first hailed him as king, they were now quickly turning on him and the signs of his impending death were looming large.

Read into that context, just as the situation for Jesus’ faithful disciples was beginning to feel hopeless, and the person who they had come to believe was the Messiah – the *Savior* of the world – was about to be *defeated* by the ruling authorities, these parables are quite remarkable in terms of what they instruct the faithful to *do*.

This is precisely when Jesus could have put out a “call to arms,” and encouraged his disciples to fight back, or alternatively to retreat from the holy city and “live to fight another day.”

He did neither. Instead, he urged them, essentially, to leave judgement in God’s hands, and focus on caring for those in need, bearing fruit for the cause of good with the gifts God had given them, to be wise, and loving, and thereby to be good and faithful *witnesses*.

And the guiding image Jesus used in today's lesson – an image that was most certainly *not* an apocalyptic one, but one that was deeply embedded in Israel's communal memory – was the image of a judge and a King, yes, but not just *any* King. A *Shepherd* King. What else could a true "Son of David" be?

Ezekiel was one of the prophets who developed that theme, speaking of the time to come when God, like a "good shepherd," would gather the Israelites (who by that time had been "scattered" throughout the empire by their conquerors) back together into a single "flock." Listen again to his words:

"For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. . . I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD."

So far, so good. That's the worthy – the chosen ones – finally being restored. God *setting things right*. But then Ezekiel went a step further with the image:

"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, 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."

So, true, Ezekiel goes on to describe God's judgement against those who scattered and injured the sheep in the first place. But the point is, the King we worship on this "Christ the King" Sunday is not simply a *judge*. Our King is a king who is actively at work *seeking* the lost, and *bringing back* those who have strayed. He is "binding up" the injured, and "strengthening the weak."

Our reading from Ezekiel ends with these words: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken."

The point is, while the "reign of Christ" ultimately means – and *must* mean – a time of reckoning, when justice finally prevails, we profess that our Lord's justice is the justice of a "Good Shepherd," who desires nothing more than the safety and wellbeing of His flock.

And so Jesus, in his advice to the disciples in the last days of his life, when it was clear that he was about to be taken from them, was *not* to go sit in a corner and do nothing until his return.

His advice, on the contrary, was, *go out into the world* to seek and save the lost, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Care for the flock, and *grow* it. Because I *care* about the flock.

That is the king we worship on this Christ the King Sunday. And that is a king I am willing to honor and serve. And that is also the world in which I want to live and work. May it be so. And to God be the glory.