



Contributed by Father Charles Fedy, C.R.

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CHRIST THE KING
November 23rd, 2014
GATHERING TIME (10-15 minutes)

Introduction to the Word:

What a strange name for the celebration of the feast we celebrate today! On this last Sunday of the Liturgical Year the Church celebrates the *Feast of Christ the King*. There are so many reasons why such a title seems totally foreign to the way Jesus lived his life and the message he communicated. While his spokespersons (the four evangelists) often speak of Jesus as being *partners* with all of us in the building up of His Kingdom, Jesus surely does not act like a king as we understand that title. When challenged by the Roman governor to justify his title as King, Jesus says simply, "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" What he *does* say is that his notion of a king is one that is *in partnership with the least ones*—the most diminished, the most ignored, the most suffering. The insightful and much respected modern theologian Walter Brueggemann tells us that "The big idea of the Old Testament is that the God of ancient Israel is a God in *relationship*, ready and able to make commitments to a series of *partners* who are thereby empowered to make a difference in the world (*An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible*). Patricia Sanchez (*Celebration*, November 20, 2011) observes that this notion of a *God in relationship*, a God as a personal partner, stands in stark contrast to most of the traditional theology that has left so many with the impression that our God is a distant and impersonal God, a God who *rules* from a distance.

Looking to the Scriptures for an accurate description of Jesus' identity, recent Scripture studies have emphasized that God's *first partner* has always been Israel, the chosen people who were called by God to a relationship through Abraham and his followers. This God who is the origin of all that exists is also in partnership with creation which mirrors the wisdom, care and Providence of its creator:

God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations (Gen 9:12)

The heavens tell of the glory of God... Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge... The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it (Ps 24:1-2).

The famed Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins confirms this amazing panorama of divine images in his majestic poem which begins with: "*The earth is filled with the grandeur of God!*"

Our ancestors gradually grew into an awareness that God chose a series of partners as he fashioned all of creation. Like Israel, all nations were made by God and have been called to glorify God as their Creator, Redeemer and King. Therefore all people and nations belong to God, and this reality is evident in our

human desire for a personal love relationship with God; we long for an affirmation that we are numbered among God's favorites. We look to today's readings to awaken in us an awareness that every one of us may come to experience a special partnership with Jesus in the building of God's Kingdom.

Warm-up Activity (about 8-10 minutes):

Just a few questions for your consideration as related to Judgment Day and final exams.

1. *In your younger years, how did you generally feel about "taking exams?"*
2. *What were the exams that you had to take that you especially dreaded?*
3. *What do you consider to be your biggest worry or concern about your final exam— Judgment Day?*

The Table of the Word

So today's feast celebrates the flattering partnership God has chosen for us. This partnership is given beautiful expression in today's first reading, as Ezekiel describes a shepherd's willingness to attend to all the needs of his helpless sheep. Shepherds in ancient times were true companions to their sheep—they literally lived with their sheep day and night. To describe the care of God for each human being in this way underscores the hands-on qualities and the partnership of our Shepherd, Partner, and King ((ibid). In today's second reading Paul celebrates this partnership with God in Jesus as he reminds us that our partner has died for us and has risen to glory. Christ is the firstfruits from the dead, and one day, all who have been partners with him will follow the path he carved out for us.

Even more challenging and unsettling to our notions about God as King is the truth we hear about in today's Gospel. There we are reminded in very clear terms that God chooses not only to partner with Israel, but with all of creation, with all nations and with every human being, but in a very special way God chooses partnership with the least ones among us: "*Whatever you do for the least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" In fact Jesus insists that we respect this partnership with the poorest of the poor, and this will be the criterion of our final judgment. This means that in our every act of kindness towards the poor, our relationship with Jesus grows stronger and deeper. In the end this partnership will be the only thing that travels with us to *our passage to everlasting life* (cf Fr. John Kavanaugh S.J. 1998).

Leader:

Lord Jesus, one with the hungry and homeless

Christ Jesus, united to the old and sick

Lord Jesus, close to the abused and abandoned

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Let us pray

(together):

Shepherd of Souls,

you lead us beside restful waters and guide us in right paths.

Help us to be good shepherds, so that only goodness and kindness

will follow us all of our days. Amen.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

(As Christians we believe that the WORD of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday and would like to you as you and I is a little as you read you and you is an empowering Word, and that God is present in the Word proclaimed. This is the Word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the Small Christian Community, namely, reflecting on our life-story within the context of this Word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life-giving.)

FIRST READING (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15–17)

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 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 injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed my sheep with justice.

“As for you, my flock,” thus says the Lord God: “I shall judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING (1 Corinthians 15:20–26, 28)

Brothers and sisters: Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler 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 all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (Matthew 25:31–46)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Jesus said to his disciples: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that 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 something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ “Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me 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 nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer,

‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

Lectio Divina means “sacred prayer.” It was a popular form of prayer in the early Church. This Word proclaimed today is God’s own Word, God’s way of speaking to you today through his own Spirit. So take a few moments to be quiet, allowing this Word you have just heard to touch you as you reflect quietly on the three readings. Is there a word or thought that somehow attracts you or has your interest? If so, simply identify it—no need to explain it—just identify it.

COMMENTARY:

It is curious that on this feast when we honour Jesus as our king, that we began with the image of a good shepherd. The more humbling occupation of shepherding has some things in common with the role of kingship (1st reading). The welfare of those entrusted to the care of the leader—the responsibility of nurturing, sustaining, and protecting the flock—are shared by both figures. At the end of the day, they both suffer the same heartache as they try to govern those who choose not to be led. Earthly kings had it all over shepherds when it comes to honour and privilege, power and status. Maybe that's why Jesus refused to claim the title when Pilate offered it to him. In his pointed question to Jesus, “*So are you a king?*” Jesus did admit to having a kingdom but it was not one you will find on a map. Jesus refuses to use his power in an abusive and selfish way but rather uses it to serve us and call forth our gifts.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes reference to “firstfruits.” In the Old Testament *firstfruits* referred either to that portion of the crop that was the first to ripen, or to that part of the harvest which was considered the best. This *firstfruits* idea also applied to sheep—the first shearing of the fleece of sheep. These firstfruits were offered in sacrifice to God and signify the consecration of the people to the Lord.

In this passage, Paul uses this metaphor to speak of the relationship between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. Christ's resurrection is the *firstfruits* of those who have *fallen asleep*. Like the firstfruits of the harvest, this promise is a foretaste of the full harvest of resurrection that lies somewhere in the future.

It seems apparent that Paul thought that Jesus would come in his own lifetime. Later he changed his mind as he came to realize that it is not a matter of time, but rather *faith in the resurrection* that guarantees his salvation. For those who had difficulty believing in the resurrection, Paul shares his firm belief that the resurrection is a promise that death is not the last word. Jesus' promise is a foretaste of the full harvest of resurrection that lies somewhere in the future. His death is the beginning of his triumph over all the evils and powers of the world which set themselves against God. This comforting passage is a powerful affirmation of hope.

Today's Gospel narrative has been described as the most dramatic in the whole New Testament, making the most revolutionary claims ever heard before or since about the human condition. It has been likened more to an apocalypse than to a parable with its drama and theatrical flourish. This elaborate description of the last judgment presents the glorified Son of Man with an entourage of angels, rising before the nations of the world. One sole criterion separates the blessed ones from the lost ones—the sheep from the goats, and this is the manner of their care and compassion for others (cf. John Kavanaugh S.J., 1998).

*“Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation 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; in prison and you came to visit me.”*

We are reminded here that, as in all of Holy Scripture, the parable of the end times is a judgment on the world, a statement of how we almost mindlessly dismember the body of Christ.

“You have done it to me: “the unwelcome unborn, the unwanted old, the victim of aids, the imprisoned, the abused, the abandoned – all these “least” – are him.

But the story is more radical still as it calls us to put love into action: The frustrated wife not giving up on her husband; the workaholic father finding time for his young son, the beleaguered

caregiver attending to the aged; the young mother nurturing the newest of her young. These are all encounters with the Lord. “*What you did to the least you did to me.*” Matthew, by design, makes these surprising insights and astonishing truths part of Jesus’ final public discourse before his passion and death—thoughts and words we dare not take lightly.

(Allow about 5 – 10 minutes for the participants to react to the **Commentary** to identify a newly discovered insight)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. (Ezekiel) “*I will rescue my sheep...*”
 - a) We all have been *rescued* at one time or another. Talk about such a time when you were rescued “big time.” At that time were you conscious of the possible intervention of the Spirit in your rescue, or were you *just lucky*?
 - b) Talk about a time when you *came to the rescue* of someone in need? What were the circumstances?
 - b) Identify one clear resolution you want to take away from today's readings and discussion. *In other words, what message really got through to you?*

2. (I Corinthians) “*Until he has put all his enemies under his feet.*”
 - a) What forces in today’s world do you consider to be the enemies of Christ and obstacles to the growth of his kingdom?
 - b) Name a few people from past or present history who you consider prophets and leaders in addressing the important issues of the day?
 - c) Does your reflection and discussion on today's readings encourage or discourage you in regard to the afterlife?
 - d) Do you think that most people you know are reasonably prepared "to meet their maker?" What is the surest guarantee that you will be prepared, based on what you learned today?

3. (Matt. 25: 32). “*...And he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.*”
 - a) On the basis of what you have learned from today's readings and reflections, what can you do personally, so that come judgment day, you are sure to be numbered among the good ones?
 - b) How do you react to what you see and hear in each day's news? For example do you believe that killing is a sacrilege? That all wars are unholy? That any choice to kill a human being is an ungodly act? Comment on these issues with your group.
 - c) In the Gospel’s powerful judgment scene how do you feel about the “standard” of justice that today’s readings emphasize?

CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

1. Word for the Week: **“Just as you did it to one of the least brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me.”**

2. Suggestion for the week:

Teresa of Avila, a Doctor of the Church, has a beautiful little prayer, which summarizes today’s key lesson and insight. Do yourself a favour: say it once each day this week. Better still, commit it to memory. Learn *to live* this prayer and you need not worry about that “final exam.”

