

St Thomas - Christ the King Sunday

Last Sunday in Pentecost

26 November 2023

Reference: Ephesians 1:15-23 & Matthew 25:31-46.

Almighty and eternal God, draw our hearts to you, guide our minds, fill our imaginations, and then use us; we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Part of the Prayer from Bishops of the Episcopal Dioceses in California)

The Gospel passage today calls for us to serve, protect, and advocate for the most vulnerable people among us. (Matthew 25:31-46).

Studies show that judgment or why we judge people comes from a place of vulnerability inside each of us. Many times, it comes from our need for self-assurance. We often misguide ourselves, convincing ourselves that we have God's favor and someone else does not.

There could be many reasons why we judge others. Sometimes, it makes it easy for us to put people in boxes of "good" and "bad." Modern TV and advertisements might contribute to this notion. We often judge people by the color of their skin, their accent, how they are dressed, their manners, and the list can go on. Many times, we realize our first impressions are not correct.

We will realize that even after spending a lifetime with someone, we will only understand a fragment of who they are in the eyes of God. God alone sees us in our entirety and decides where we belong. None of us are judges or jurors. Only God is the Judge.

Bishop Mariann Budde, who was my Bishop when I served in the Diocese of Washington DC, says in her experience that Christians tend to gravitate toward one of two poles.

It is not evangelical or progressive, liberalism or conservatism, Democrat or Republican. Instead, she said, Christians gravitate between being described as "John 3.16 Christians," while others see themselves more as "Matthew 25 Christians."

In John 3:16, Jesus tells Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)". The focus of their dialogue is the importance of believing in Jesus and enjoying eternal life. In subsequent verses, Jesus says that those who do not believe him will be condemned.

In contrast, when we heard the Gospel reading for today from Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of final judgment in which belief in Jesus doesn't feature at all. It says that Jesus, The Son of Man, will come and separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Those sheep will be welcomed into the Kingdom of God as they live a life of compassion and mercy.

Bishop Mariann said that most Episcopalians, not all, gravitate toward the Matthew 25 end of the Christian belief spectrum. They are generally more comfortable focusing on actions rather than beliefs, calling for their willingness to be held accountable for their compassion.

Yet there can be an emptiness or hollowness to faith that isn't grounded in a living relationship with Christ. In John Chapter 15, Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing". (John 15:5).

Bishop Mariann and I believe that we should all be John 3:16 and Matthew 25 Christians one cannot exist without the other. Whatever mercy and compassion we show to serve, protect, and advocate for the most vulnerable must blossom from our living relationship with Jesus.

Whatever mercy and kindness we show others must stem from our relationship with Jesus. When we give our gifts to the Children whose dads or Mom is in jail on the 16th of December, we invite them to receive the gift at the St Thomas church to point the children and their parents to Jesus and God's love for them through the church of which we are all apart.

When our faith is built on Christ, God gives us the love and compassion we need to carry out God's work here on earth. One of the words that came out at me reading today's gospel is "When."

In my pastoral and daily work, the word “when” comes up very often: In jail, “When is your release date, or in a hospital setting, when is the surgery scheduled? The response to the question “when” often brings out anticipation, surprises and sometimes joy or sadness. Many times, brings out unknown information.

Life is full of unknowns. We see in today's Gospel starts with, “**When** the Son of Man comes in his glory”, the groups both on the right and left ask this question: “Lord, **when** was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And **when** did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothing? And **when** was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” (Matthew 25:37 & 44).

Many times, God has given me opportunities to help others. I know all too well that I have turned away from serving people with indifference or due to fatigue. However, God continues to give second and many chances to serve others. If we fail one, another comes along. The need for mercy and care in this world will always be abundant. So be ready for your “when” comes!

As Christians, we are called to serve others through our Baptism covenant. It calls us to “Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as yourself. Then, calls us to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. (BCP. p305).

As we approach the Holy season of Advent. I urge you as I urge myself to draw closer to Christ's child. Closer to Jesus in faith through prayer and reflection on Scripture. Draw closer to Jesus by loving others, particularly those needing mercy and kindness. Some may be in prison, a hospital, or a homeless person. They may be your next-door neighbor, a church member, or a family member.

As Christians, we need not feel obliged to choose between the belief found in John 3:16 and the mercy found in Matthew 25, but rather see them as part of or identical to the same call- to know Jesus and His love for us. We work to share God's Love and Mercy with the world as best we can.

Thankfully, we can leave matters of final judgment in God's merciful hands.

Amen.