

Sermon for 22 November 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday

Scriptures: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

“Division”

So, what would YOU preach on this crowning Sunday of the Church year, with its theme of the high standing of Jesus: The Christ, the Messiah, the clearest picture of God we have as Christians?

The Old Testament lesson insists that God will resolve all differences and complete the creation that has been good, very good, from the beginning. No matter how things look now. Stick with that image. “Trust and Obey,” as the old song says.

The psalm says joy is the proper expression for us, because of this ...a reminder each Sunday of where we and all things are heading; a tribute to God for setting things up to be so... and a prayer to make us more cooperative as we suffer and strive in less than ideal circumstances, with less than reliable minds and bodies.

Ephesians bucks us up with compliments and encouragement. “You’re doing well,” Paul writes. “People see and count on you. The world’s better because God’s so reliable and so clearly backing you up. God is great, all the time; All the time, God is great!”

Matthew, then, gives us a dreadful story of those that receive a prize, and those that lose out.

The passage makes a point: There are right ways to go, and wrong ways ... and the right ways are unselfish, while the wrong ways just miss the point.

Both sides are mystified. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?”
“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison, and did not take care of you?”

When I found myself in seminary, I was greatly relieved to discover that my professors looked @ scripture and all church traditions with all the interpretative tools available in our time. History, science, psychology, common sense, all made up our faith walk. Over the years, as more discoveries have been made in archaeology, and more political twists, and technological developments, and personal experience, have added to my vision and that of the rest of us, the outlook, and the work, have gotten even more interesting.

So that, right now, I can suppose Matthew was watching Rome totally squash the people of Israel to the point of despair and social psychosis which is often called “apocalyptic.” Reality had gotten out of sight. Matthew’s telling his church, as Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If” says, “If you can keep your head when those about you/are losing theirs and blaming it on you/ If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you ... yet make allowance for their doubting, too...”

I don't want any part of a God who sends people to hell. Guilt is theft of self-trust, and has only minimal positive influence on human behavior, from my experience.

...and the idea that those who were bad and those who were good were equally surprised has an ethical point ... but it doesn't help me much to think those I look up to just do it naturally.

Living right is both hard work and mystery, as I see it.

What do you think?

Matthew relates, though.

Division is very much alive and well in America. I know no way to explain it except to blame it on the politicians, and God knows that gets us nowhere. People drawn to leadership are of all kinds, and we need them as much as doctors and teachers and honest mechanics and brave grandmothers and all the rest...

So I say the scripture is telling us, on this high point of the year, in the middle of all kinds of low points in holiday spirit, and fear and fatigue on every level, that we've got to face our divisions, not deny or avoid them. At least, that's what I get from putting this scrap of historical evidence from the religion we practice, before us. Our branch of God's health workers, God's army, has messed up royally whenever it assumed everybody should think like we do, or whenever we tried to control people different from us, or even occupy more space than we could earn without kicking others off and out. God is too great for that. We don't need to be in charge of more than serving the needy, the prisoners, and all those other types Jesus hung out with. Not giving in to their foolish ways, but helping them as we'd like to be helped.

How that applies to present-day America is more than I've worked out. I'm mystified right now. My instinct says get to work doing something useful and enjoyable and try, just please try, not to fight. That's enough. If that turns out to be helpful in the larger scheme, that's because God's run such a good show from the beginning, making it more appealing to love than to hate.

That's it for this year.

We're divided.

Work on it.

God is.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.