

November 26, 2017: Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/Christ the King (Year A)
Matthew 25:31-46: Remembering the Little People

It's hard to believe, but according to the Christian Calendar, this Sunday marks the end of another year. We began with the season of Advent, looking forward to the birth of Christ. We celebrated his birth on Christmas day. From there we moved through the story of his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Then we celebrated the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, and talked about what it means to be a part of the Church, the body of Christ, waiting faithfully until Christ returns to earth as King. It's fitting that this last Sunday of the Christian Calendar is known as Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, we will start all over again.

The story of Jesus certainly seems representative of those that follow the familiar pattern of rags to riches. The same Jesus who we celebrate as King of Kings and Lord of Lords was born in relative obscurity, in a small, little-known corner of the world, to unwed parents, in a stable, in the one camel town of Bethlehem. In our retelling of the story we romanticize it, but there was nothing romantic about. There was dirt, blood, the stench of livestock, the pain of childbirth, a nervous father-to-be, and a screaming baby. Things didn't really get any better.

After his birth Jesus and his family fled to Egypt where they were surely treated as outsiders. When they returned to Israel they settled in the town of Nazareth, a town on "the other side of the tracks," with a reputation for being filthy, dirty, and full of no-accounts. The circumstances surrounding his birth followed him everywhere he went, not the part about being divine but the part about being "illegitimate," for that was the way most people saw it.

As he traveled around preaching and teaching he had no steady source of income, no place to lay his head. And of course he was ridiculed, tormented, persecuted, beaten and crucified. But as we have already mentioned; after his death...he struck it rich. He returned to his rightful place at the right hand of God the Father becoming an heir of untold riches and given dominion over every ruler and authority.

We love these kinds of stories. America is full of them. Countless tales of wall-street tycoons, business moguls, professional athletes, movie stars, and famous musicians, who began life literally in rags, and who now have more money than they know what to do with. One thing we often wonder about those people is if they remember their humble beginnings, if they remember their roots, if they still remember the little people, the people who didn't make it big, the people who still live in rags. When we study their lives it's easy to see that some do, and some don't. Jesus is one who does.

Even though Jesus is now King, and has come into all these incredible riches, he still remembers what it was like to be in rags. He remembers what it was like to be poor and hungry and thirsty. He remembers what it was like to be an outcast and a stranger. He remembers what it was like to be cold, naked, and without shelter. He remembers what it was like to be in spiritual, physical and emotional pain. He remembers what it was like to be abused and mistreated. He remembers the little people. When he returns as King he going to reward others who do too, and punish those who forget them.

This story is the last in a series of parables and stories about God's coming judgment that span several chapters. You might be tired of hearing about it. Believe me, I'm tired of talking about it. But Jesus would not have spent so much time on it if it were not important. We need to listen.

In chapter 21 through the parable of the vineyard we learned about the importance of bearing the fruit of the kingdom.

In chapter 22 through the parable of the wedding banquet we learned about the importance of being clothed in righteousness.

In chapter 23 we were warned against hypocrisy, and reminded that loving God and loving other people are what the Law, at its core, is really all about.

In chapter 24 Jesus explained how unexpected his return will be. This led into...

In chapter 25 the parable of the bridesmaids stressed the importance of being prepared for Jesus' return. The parable of the talents stressed the importance of being a good steward of all the gifts God has entrusted to us. And now this, a call to remember the little people, to love and care for the least of these, the poor, the hungry, the naked, the stranger and the imprisoned.

Something else we need to keep in mind. Everything Jesus has said to this point about judgment and being ready has been directed toward religious people, either the religious leaders, the Scribes and the Pharisees, or his followers. But these words are directed toward all the nations, everyone, including those who don't know him or claim to follow him. This is the criteria upon which all the earth will be judged, whether or not they loved and cared for their fellow human beings. If this is what God expects of unbelievers, how much more would he expect it from those of us who say we are his disciples?

We have the advantage of knowing that when we are looking at the least of these, we are looking at the face of Jesus. Because Jesus knows what it's like to walk in their shoes. He still identifies with them. So much so that to give a cup of water to someone who is thirsty, or a piece of food to someone who is hungry, or to provide clothing or shelter to someone who is naked, or to welcome a stranger, or visit someone who is sick or in prison, is no different than as if you did it for Jesus himself.

A tough question for me to ask myself, and all of you, and an even tougher question for us to answer, is this. "How much differently would we treat our fellow human beings, our co-workers, our neighbors, our classmates, the homeless, illegal immigrants, the mentally ill, the poor, etc. if when we looked at each one we saw Jesus?"

I read a story recently about a once great monastery that had fallen upon hard times. (A monastery is a place where monks live together in community with one another.) All of the smaller houses that made up the complex had fallen into such disrepair they were no longer fit to live in. All that was left was the main house where the five remaining monks lived; the abbot, who was the leader, and four others, and they were all over seventy years old. They all knew that without the infusion of new life the monastery had no future.

In the woods surrounding the monastery was a hermitage. This is a place where a religious person goes to live an even more secluded life than in a monastery. With the situation so desperate the abbot decided to visit the hermitage and ask if by some chance the hermit who lived there could offer any profound advice that would save the monastery.

The hermit welcomed the abbot when he arrived, but as the abbot explained the purpose of his visit the hermit could only echo his sentiments. "I know what you mean," he said, "people are simply no longer interested in religious vocations such as ours, either the Spirit is no longer calling, or people are no longer listening. I'm not sure." And the conversation went on like that for a while.

When it came time for the abbot to leave he realized he had not yet heard the hermit offer any specific advice or even a suggestion about what he could do. So he asked one more time, "Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice that you can give me that would save my dying monastery?" "No, I'm sorry," the hermit responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

The abbot left more confused than when he had arrived. When he returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him and wanted to know what the hermit had to say. "He couldn't help," the abbot replied. "He says the problems we are experiencing are being experienced all over. The last thing he told me, which still doesn't make any sense, was that one of us was the Messiah."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one?

At first the four monks all figured it must be the abbot. After all, he had been the leader of the monastery for more than a generation. Then they thought it might be one of them. As they considered the matter they began to see reasons why any one of them might be the Messiah. As they continued to reflect upon it the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect and care and compassion, on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah.

Because the forest in which the monastery was located was extremely beautiful, people would occasionally come to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, they couldn't help but notice the way the five old monks treated one another.

There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then one day some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery was once again vibrant and growing, all thanks to the hermit's "advice," which caused them to treat one another as if they were all the Messiah.

The world would be such a different place if everyone would follow the hermit's advice, which he borrowed from the teaching of Jesus. We cannot compel the world to listen. But with God's help we can make our church, our homes, our community, into a place where the little people are not forgotten, where everyone knows that God loves and remembers them. In this place, people can see a little glimpse of the coming Kingdom. They will want to know our King.