

Sunday of the Last Judgment  
March 2, 2008

Every year, as we are drawn into the journey of Great Lent, we hear the gospel that we just heard today - the parable of the sheep and the goats. This gospel challenges us to look deeper in our hearts, past the surface layer of self-satisfaction, self-congratulations, and complacency. It presents to us the question are we truly Christian? Are we ready to lay everything down for Christ? Are we ready for the final judgment of our souls?

This gospel presents to us a picture of the end of time when Christ will judge both the living and the dead, as we say in the Creed, inviting us to see ourselves as the Lord looks at us - our accomplishments, our faithfulness, our love and whether or not we have true concern for those God places before us as well as concern for the inward working of our souls.

God drew us out of nothingness, and made each one of us a living soul. He breathed into us the gift of life and restores us by pouring out His Life for us in His incarnation, death and resurrection.

God is especially interested in seeing how we behave when there is no apparent prospect of reward He especially looks to see whether it is out of love that we act; love, which we share with Him, and is the ground of our being.

Sometimes it feels as if the needs of this world are unquenchable and therefore hopeless. Last night rockets again slammed into Gaza, in response to rockets that slammed into Ashkelon. Our economy is deteriorating, hundreds of people have been laid off in Eugene in the past week. There is a resurgence of tuberculosis. The schools are in great turmoil. In each one of our lives, there are challenges and heartaches. The cares of the world could easily cause us to lose hope. But as sheep on the right side, we choose to be close to the voice of the Good Shepherd of our souls, whose very existence in the Creation from the very beginning to the very end,, is the root of all hope and the blessings of God. We are called to face all the difficulties that life presents to us with a well-functioning heart.

It is our desire that our hearts would be ruled, not by the cares of the world, which constricts and locks our attention to the outward cares and concerns of the body, but ruled by Christ Himself, Who is the good cause we have for intelligent hope. When our hearts are truly opened by Christ, in baptism, we should cease to be ruled by the cares of the world. This opening of the heart Christ gives to us in baptism is one of the proofs of life beyond this world, which can result in a mystical conviction and the transparency of our nature to the reality of things beyond this world.

When we are baptized, all of our life is given to Christ and the Church. All of our hopes, aspirations, family relations; all of our time, talent and treasure belongs to Christ. Therefore, it is the Lord's treasure that we are stewards of. It is of His treasure, given to us from the foundation of the world, we are called upon to share with those in need, as if they are Christ. We long to hear from our Lord, "As you have done it unto one of these, the least of my brethren, you have done it unto me."

There is an outward and an inward meaning in this gospel. The outward meaning, should be easily discerned by all of us. We are called upon to visit the sick, the shut-ins, those in prison, to give food to the hungry, shelter those who have need. The Lord tests our hearts, He tests the resolve of our baptism through those who seek our help. To quote St. Nikolai, "God ...needs nothing. He Who created bread cannot be hungry, nor He who created water be thirsty. He who is the source of health cannot be sick. But he seeks that we give alms, in order in this way, to soften and ennoble our hearts. The Lord desires mercy of us, mercy above all else, for He knows that mercy is the way in which faith in God, hope in God and love for God can be restored."

There is also an inward meaning that has to do with Christ within ourselves. The righteous man within us is very small, and the sinner within us can seem a Goliath. But the righteous man is Christ's brother that we must protect, free and strengthen. If our mind hungers for God, we must feed it noble thoughts. If our heart is bare and naked, we must clothe it with compassion. If our soul is sick and imprisoned by evil actions, and we are mindful of it, we visit Christ within us. When the inner man is raised up, we can say with St. Paul, "I live, but not I, but Christ liveth within me."

Let us keep this image of the Last Judgment as we approach Great Lent, that this image would help turn us from the path of destruction to the path of salvation. Let us be prayerful that in that hour, we would be gathered with the Lord in His glory, with all the holy angels; that we be found as a faithful flock, obedient to His voice and truly grateful for the gift of holy baptism. These precious few days of Lent are given to us that we might prepare for eternity.