

Matthew 25: 31-46 Surprises

Today is known on the liturgical calendar as Christ the King Sunday. We declare and celebrate many times throughout the year the kingship of Christ. We especially celebrate the resurrection and ascension into heaven as part of this kingship. In our affirmation of faith this morning we will affirm our belief that Christ ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father. In that statement is the unstated affirmation that it is a throne upon which Christ is sitting and that from that position he rules. The next affirmation in the Apostles' Creed is that from this position at the Father's right hand, Christ will be judging all those who have lived—both the quick and the dead. Our usual inclination is to avoid thinking about the judgment aspect implied in this creed. Or rather we like to think of it as a judgment between those who are good and those who are evil. Under this assumption we are not particularly concerned because although we confess our sin at least weekly through the prayer of confession in the bulletin, we don't really consider ourselves evil. We know we have shortcomings in our obedience to God's will, but we confess, repent and try to do better. Thus we are not evil and feel that we have reason to be joyful about this coming judgment—or at least not worried. Our passage taken from Matthew this morning is about that judgment which will come as the passage states "when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him." Son of Man is the name that Jesus most often calls himself within the gospel of Matthew. This passage does not begin or read as the parables which come before it. There is no making a comparison which illustrates for us something about what God's kingdom will be like. It is more like an outline of what is going to happen when the kingdom is not just near and found in glimpses, but instead it describes what happens when God brings the kingdom Christ described fully into the present and people are waiting at the entrance. Just after this passage Jesus states clearly to the disciples that the Passover is just two days away and that he will be handed over to be crucified at that time. Jesus is clear on what awaits him, so this passage could be considered a last teaching, a giving of final words and a chance for his disciples to learn about what will happen when God's righteousness and justice sets the standard. Although it follows parables about the final judgment which will occur at the end of times, it really is more a straight forward description than a parable. Matthew as we have noted has judgment as a central aspect of the narrative which he wrote. There is a division between two groups but the basis for the division is plainly stated. In Matthew there are frequent examples of the tension which exists between obedience and disobedience to God's will, of what the expected behavior of those who are obedient will be. The one who is obedient is often a surprise to the disciples as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus also self describes himself as the Good Shepherd who goes out to seek the one lost sheep. The image of God as a shepherd occurs throughout Hebrew Scriptures as can be seen from the reading taken from Ezekiel this morning. In that passage, the Lord tell the prophet that he will seek out his sheep and gather them together in a good pasture, caring for them. Like the Matthew passage, there is also talk of judgment through the image of separating sheep and goats. But that is not the only separation which will occur according to the Ezekiel passage. The fat sheep and the lean sheep will also be separated and are destined for different fates. It seems that among those

claimed by God, or those who seemed to have been claimed there are some who are not uniformly pleasing to God. God is promising to search out and rescue those scattered who belong in the flock of sheep, but there will be a judgment made about those who are “fat” sheep because of how they have achieved their prosperity. It seems to me that like many images found in Matthew, this passage about the judgment of all the nations has a basis in the tradition in which Jesus was raised—the teachings of the law and the prophets. Verse 33: “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.” Here we have described that day when the quick and the dead will be judged. But the scene is not exactly how we would picture it because surely it would not happen this way—those who are placed at the right hand of the king as sheep are just as surprised by their placement as are those designated as goats and placed on the left hand side. Does that mean that those on the right hand side actually did not do the acts which comprised the basis of Jesus’ teachings while those on the left did and didn’t know it? No, I don’t think that the ones praised are surprised because they are receiving credit for actions they did not do. What has surprised them is the king’s statement that they have cared for him. Just as I think that the ones on the left are surprised that at the accusation that they failed to care for him. They had not seen him when he was in need. The surprise was not actually about what either group had done or not done alone. Instead, I think for both groups the surprise was in the personalization of the actions. The king had come to them and neither one had known it. The reasons that those on the right are invited in are because Jesus says, “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.” Those who are placed on the left hear basically the same list only from aspect of failing to tend to Jesus when he came to them. Both groups surprise rests in the fact that they encountered Jesus and did not recognize him. Jesus’ whole life had been a surprise to the disciples. They expected that he would lead them to oust the Romans, but instead he healed the sick and lame. He cast out demons. He spent his time with outcasts. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God coming near, but he taught about loving neighbors and enemies. It was his surprising and radical teachings which led to the animosity of the religious leaders. His judgments about their leadership was very similar to the pronouncements of the prophets—he spoke truth to power telling the powerful that God was concerned for the poor, the vulnerable, the orphan and widow and the alien in the land whose rights were ignored. Surprises that those in power did not want to hear and which frightened them. So it is not really surprising that on the described Day of Judgment that the basis for the separation is not exactly as one would expect. In this passage both the blessed and the cursed are surprised by their destinations. To follow Jesus means to care for the poor that is obvious. James Forbes, the former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City put it this way: “Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.” Throughout scripture God’s nature has always been to express a concern for the poor, God’s justice demanded that the Israelites make provisions for the widow, orphan and the resident alien in the instructions given and recorded in the Torah. But the reaction of the group which is rejected is to ask when did we see you and fail to respond. In other words, there were times when they did respond by caring actions to those they perceived to be in need. The answer of the king is that “just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” That is the crux of the

illustration, the reason for the surprise—in neither case was the king recognized because they failed to see God in the ones they encountered. It seems that we are to care for the poor not out of guilt, not out of some idealistic vision that loathes private property, not because the poor are virtuous. We don't do it just as a utilitarian act of social justice, or as an altruistic act with no element of self-interest or expectation of reward, or even as a sign of our personal faith. Rather it seems from this passage that we are called to do it because doing it is a way to serve God. Since Jesus' entire life on earth was spent serving among those who formed that "least of these" category we have to wonder why there is surprise that the Son of Man would separate those gathered on Judgment Day on this basis. The disciples were told not to seek recognition or the high place at the table, to serve rather than be served. They were told to recognize neighbor in unexpected places. The image we have of Christ the King coming in glory is one which calls forth images of power, strength, might and glory. Yet Jesus came to us in the vulnerable flesh of an infant and submitted to the shame and pain of the cross. And perhaps that is why we should look for Jesus today in the faces of those that cause us to avert our eyes when we see them. Perhaps that means that each and every day we can encounter the living and real presence of God as we reach out to care for the needs of our neighbor who is not familiar to us. Perhaps it is when we try to change the things in our culture which resemble the things described in Ezekiel that we serve the king. Perhaps that is the greatest surprise of all—our God is not distant, but present with us and calls us to respond with love in service to all those whom he claims because he is also with them. Amen.