

Seeing Jesus' Face

The title of this sermon is seeing Jesus' face. It obviously comes from the scene presented in the passage from Matthew 25 which was the gospel lesson for today. As I thought about the text, I was reminded of my first visit to Nazareth and the Catholic church of the Annunciation which we visited there. This church was built on one of the two traditional site thought to be where the angel Gabriel first announced to the young peasant girl Mary that she was to bear the son of God. The church as it is now was rebuilt after being heavily damaged by warfare between Israel and the Arab states. As part of the rebuilding which was financed by donation from Catholic congregation around the world an area outside the main church was added. This area around the church has an extensive walkway which is an art gallery where there are panels displaying images of the Madonna and child...each of these images comes from a different country...and in each panel the mother and child...Mary and the baby Jesus are portrayed looking as if they were natives of the country which sent the panel. When the artist portrayed the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus, the face of Jesus and his mother they imagined was similar to the faces they saw around them. Sometime, when gathering together for longer times is possible, I would like to share some of those pictures from those travels with you. When I was growing up, on the walls of the Sunday School classes, the faces of those portrayed there...those representing Biblical figures from God or Moses to Jesus...had a similar tendency...those faces portrayed in all those scenes resembled the faces of the folks gathered there to worship. Since we were all a very homogeneous group that really did not seem at all odd to me. I the pictures I same familiar faces. I did not consider how unlikely it would have been for Jesus to have looked like someone from Europe. Walking around the gallery in Nazareth brought home that tendency we have in a much more vivid way...we tend to imagine our Lord looks like us...no matter where we come from...and in most of our cases...the unlikelihood that it is possible in the case of the historic Jesus does not occur to us. In some ways how we imagine the Lord appeared may not matter. Yet seeing Jesus in others seems to be important in this passage. However, in the passage from Matthew 25 which we have before us today, the problem is not that everyone sees Jesus' face in those around them; the problem is that evidently no one is seeing Jesus' face in the places that Jesus desires them to recognize him. The entire 25th chapter of Matthew is focused on Jesus' concern that his disciples be prepared to take up the task that he has chosen for them...to continue to proclaim that God's reign is near. He has told them that he must suffer and die, but has promised to return. Earlier in this chapter he has told them the return may be delayed, but they are to remain awake, to remain prepared for his return. This seems to be tied to the keeping of the faith and use of the gifts they have been given, but it might also be about having the correct perceptions about God and God's desire for how God's community...how the citizens of God's reign are to be treated. If we think about these aspects of what Jesus is telling his disciples as he nears the end of his ministry, as he is facing the betrayal and suffering so near...then the sense of urgency about his teachings seems an aspect of his concern for these his chosen friends. It is this aspect of these other parables that seems to lead into this last scene which Jesus describes which is often called the judgment of the nations. In this narrative, Jesus is no longer speaking in a parable but directly uses the name by which he calls himself...the Son of Man. He is no longer vague about what he is describing either...When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels

with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. This is definitely describing his return and victory over all that have opposed him...it is clearly a time when judgment will be made...an accounting is going to happen based on the actions that have occurred while those he has gathered are waiting for this return. Whether this is couched in terms of bridesmaids waiting while the bridegroom negotiates or slaves entrusted with property while the owner is on a long journey...it is now the time for an accounting of whether or not those waiting have acted wisely, have understood and perceived what their absent Lord desired, have understood their purpose. In the scene described here, all nations are gathered and people are separated into two groups. There are no longer the multiple great divisions which seem to divide by nationality, ethnicity, tribe, clan, rank, or anything else. In this great gathering of all nations there are now only two groups of people...likened to sheep and goats...and put all are placed either to the right or to the left. The Son of Man...the king on his throne will then address the two groups...first the group on the right saying, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." This group is then called the righteous and they respond to this description of their actions with what sounds like surprise: "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king's response is "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me." The narrative continues with the king addressing the second group on the other side...except this group is accursed, not blessed...but for the same reasons listed but in the negative. "Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." This group expresses the same sense of surprise...wanting to know just when did they see their king in such straits and not respond by taking care of him indicating that they have responded with care IF they had recognized him. And the answer is the same...just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Although the outcome for these groups is greatly different...it is striking that they have one amazing thing in common...neither group was able to recognize the face of Jesus in the face of those whom Jesus dwelled and claimed...in those Jesus called the members of his family...those whom he spent most of his time on earth expressing concern for...the least, the lost and the last of this world. In this narrative we are not given the motivations which separated these people into the two groups, what made one group righteous and able to care for the least, the lost and the last as Jesus desired, while the other did not. However, since even the accursed felt that if they had recognized Jesus they would have surely acted as God desired perhaps we need to examine closely this tendency we have of only seeing the face of Jesus in those who look like us. For Jesus claims us all, as members of his family and we need to see him in all of our brothers and sisters. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

