

## Pentecost 23 – P29A – Last Sunday (11/20/11 – *Come, You Blessed Ones of the Father*)

In the Name of JESUS. [Amen]

As usual on this *Last Sunday of the Church Year*, our Holy Scriptures direct our hearts and minds to the Last Things. In our *Holy Gospel*, we hear Jesus' explanation to His disciples regarding the end of this world ... and eternal reward or punishment. It is a message that we hear with mixed feelings.

On the one hand, there is anticipation and joy. At long last, the King of kings and Lord of lords will reveal Himself visibly to the world ... once again. Nearly two thousand years have passed since the Son manifest Himself in our human flesh. The world doubts His existence. There are a number of clichés that come to mind: “Out of sight, out of mind” for one; “Seeing is believing” for another. And we cannot so off-handedly malign the world for what we ourselves struggle with from time to time. Especially in times of trial and tribulation, we are all too prone to doubt our Lord's presence with us – despite His promise to be with us *always, even to the end of the age* [MT 28.20].

On the other hand, we experience trepidation and great fear at the thought of our lives being laid open and judged before the world. The word of our Lord is certainly kind to those He places on His right hand. Nevertheless, in the very next breath, He is quite harsh – condemning ... and damning – to those on His left. It is hard to hear our loving Savior say: *Depart from Me, you cursed, 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 no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.* [MT 25.41-43]

In particular, our fear problem results from our own lack of doing the things for which our Lord commends the sheep on the right. We know how often we have ignored the hungry, thirsty stranger – and looked down on the poorly clothed. We fail to visit our family and loved ones as we ought – let alone the sick and those in prison. And we have “good reasons” for not doing the things Christ commends here. It is easy to micro-manage other people's lives and decide that they are squandering their time, talents, and treasures. It is their

own fault if they are hungry, thirsty, naked, and out on the street. It is easy to ignore the stranger altogether – he (or she) might be a thief ... or worse yet, some sort of homicidal maniac ... aching to start a career as a serial killer. Such are our thoughts to justify our lack of compassion for our neighbors.

Moreover, our society has tried to teach us that if we are diligent about the food we eat and proper exercise, we will be healthy ... not get sick ... and live long lives. And we have bought into it – at least to a great extent. Thus, we have the mistaken – often-judgmental – notion that those who are sick have brought it on themselves. That goes triple for any sort of mental illness. And, once again, we excuse ourselves from showing the mercy God requires of us ... and has Himself demonstrated to us. In fact, our callous and sinful judging can go so far as to declare that the terrible situation a person is in – physical or mental illness – is God’s punishment upon them due to their sin. Our Lord addresses this in another place, when He corrects the wrong thinking that some in Galilee massacred by Pilate and others in Jerusalem crushed by a tower were worse sinners than the rest of us. ***No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*** [Lk 13.1-5] But sickness and death are the result of the fall into sin. We have God’s Word on that [GEN 2.17].

And the bottom line is, of course, that we are all – by nature – works righteousness thinkers. We hear the Savior’s words, and we say to ourselves: *See, it IS based on works that we are commended by God and get into His heaven. Jesus says as much right here.* When we – or someone we know and love – become very sick, our minds immediately look at deeds. Are we – or they – living a righteous life or not? Is my sin the direct cause of my illness?

For us Christians, the trick is to strive with all our might to have fervent love toward one another ... **without** letting our relative success or failure enter into our thinking regarding our salvation. Faith bears the fruit of good works in our lives. Good works **must** follow on faith. However, our works do not enter into the judgment of righteousness before God. With Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul, ***we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the Law*** [ROM 3.28].

What do we make of our Lord’s words here, then? Am I – and the historic

Lutheran Church – denying what Jesus says so clearly here? By no means! Look carefully at the order of events in our text – as our Savior describes how things will transpire when He visibly returns in great glory on the Last Day.

***When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*** [MT 25.31-32] Notice that there is no word about judging works at this point! The Son of God comes in glory. The angels gather all peoples before Him – from Adam and Eve down to the last man, woman, and child. Then Jesus our Good Shepherd separates them – some to the right ... some to the left. It will be as easy as separating sheep and goats. The white fuzzy ones go on the right. The smelly hairy ones go on the left.

The point is that there is a clear distinction between them – **already!** Jesus does not have to run a streaming video of our lives on Judgment Day in order to determine where we belong for all eternity. It is not as if the whole world will get to see every second of our lives – including those seconds we do not want anyone to see ... and repent of ever having done. It is only **after** the Lord pronounces the blessing or the curse that He enumerates the good works ... or lack thereof. It seems that God is allowing the nations to judge **His** fairness! The “evidence” that Jesus presents is given so that all will declare: “Yes, the sentence is fair and just.” All will see that our Savior’s separation is righteous. Even unbelievers will have to declare it so – just as they will bow before Him and ***confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father*** [PHI 2.11]. God is not capricious. His judgment is not random ... or cruel.

In fact, the words of our Lord here prove quite the contrary. Notice, dear Christians, how differently Jesus speaks to the two groups ... and about the two eternal destinations. To the believers on His right hand He says, ***Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*** [MT 25.34] First, note that Jesus calls the believers ***you who are blessed by My Father***. This indicates that these did not believe in Jesus Christ the Lord by their own reason or strength. It was, rather, because of the Father’s blessing – by the Holy Spirit working through Word and

Sacrament to create and sustain a living faith in Christ – that they are who they are ... and stand where they stand. That is Good News for us! It is infinitely better to have our eternal fate in the hands of our perfectly good, holy, and gracious God. Second, note that Jesus says they – **we!** – are to ***inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*** In His love – even knowing and seeing that His creation would fall into deep, rebellious sin against Him – God has ***prepared for you*** a Kingdom ***from the foundation of the world!*** For likewise ***from the foundation of the world*** our gracious God planned your eternal salvation in the Son [REV 13.8].

On the other hand, note that Jesus calls those on His left ***you cursed*** [MT 25.41]. He does **not** say, you cursed *by My Father*. For though they are cursed for their persistent unbelief, that was **not** the Father's primary will. God ***desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*** [1TIM 2.4]. Note further that Jesus does **not** say that the place of their eternal punishment was ***prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*** The ***eternal fire*** was, in fact, ***prepared for the devil and his angels*** [MT 25.41b]. God did **not** create some people to condemn them to hell. His intention – ***from the foundation of the world*** – was to save **all** people in Christ Jesus. Those who end up in ***eternal punishment*** [MT 25.46] are there by their own impenitent rejection of God and His mercy in Christ.

Lastly, I would like us to notice just how kindly Jesus speaks to us, His believers. You and I fear Judgment Day, because we know that we have so often fallen short of the glory of God. We have not been the kind, merciful, generous, loving disciples He has called us to be. Yet in His mercy, **none** of that comes up for us on Judgment Day. Do you know why? Because in Holy Baptism you have put on Christ [GAL 3.27]. Because the Blood of Jesus has cleansed you from all sin and unrighteousness [1JN 1.7, 9]. Because through faith in Christ, His perfectly holy and righteous life is accounted to **you** for righteousness ... since the Son of God has borne and taken away all your iniquities [ISA 53.11; ROM 4.5]. Before God and the nations you will appear righteous – indeed, in Christ, you already are – and you will go into eternal life.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]