November 23, 2014
CHRIST THE KING

We come today to the end of the cycle of the Christian year. We mark this culminating Sunday with the celebration and recognition that Christ is King. He is the One who came to earth as a tiny and vulnerable baby; who was fully human while also fully divine, who suffered and died on a cross, and who was raised from the dead by God—this same Jesus now dwells for all eternity with God the Father. It is before this One, ever Christ the King, that we will all ultimately be judged.

It is this judgment before Christ the King that Saint Matthew depicts. There are several important ideas for us to ponder in this scripture passage.

First, to refer to Jesus as a King is unusual in the Gospels. Usually Jesus avoided titles, preferring to mingle with the crowds as a simple son of a carpenter from Nazareth. When he referred to
himself he seemed to prefer the phrase, Son of Man. But the Gospels show that sometimes people referred to Jesus as Rabbi, Teacher, Prophet, or Messiah. He seemed uncomfortable with each of these titles, because all of them carried overtones of meanings in that day that did not correspond to the mission and character of our Lord. In Matthew’s Gospel, the title King does occasionally occur in reference to Jesus. The Magi in Matthew’s opening chapters came to Jerusalem following a star, and seeking “the one who is born King of the Jews.” At the Triumphant Entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Matthew quotes the Old Testament to interpret the action of Jesus riding on the donkey, “Behold, your King comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey.” During the trial before Pilate, Jesus is asked if he is the King of the Jews. Matthew mentions several times the mockery by the soldiers and the bystanders at the cross, as they make fun of the kingship of Jesus. And over his head on the cross, Pilate orders the words to be engraved on a sign, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews”.
So we should not be surprised that in his final words of teaching to his followers before his betrayal, at as told by Saint Matthew, we would have this parable of judgment, with Jesus cast as a Shepherd King who divides the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous, on the final Day of the Lord. For Matthew, Jesus was, and always had been, the true king, even though he shied away from that title for obvious reasons during his ministry. But he reigns from a cross, turning the mockery and defeat of that dark day into the ultimate victory over death and darkness. King Jesus was wrapped in humility instead of royal robes, choosing the path of suffering rather than privilege and comfort, walking with the common man instead of elevating himself over them. Certainly Jesus was not, and is not, a King like any monarch this world has ever known!

Second, notice that in this parable of judgment the element of surprise. Both the righteous and the unrighteous are surprised by the sentence that the King passes upon them. The
criteria of judgment in each case was “how did you treat the poor, the outcast, the “least of these.” (Sounds like one named Francis from Rome?) But both groups are shocked, and exclaim, “Lord when did we see you naked, or hungry, or in prison, or a stranger in need of hospitality?” The righteous simply expressed acts of love to their fellow humans, without thought of recognition, they weren’t thinking about reward at the last judgment. Maybe they had even forgotten entirely about these acts of mercy. So their surprise turns to great joy, of course, but precisely because it was not self-conscious. It was just actions of love, pure and simple. And to Jesus, when they acted in this way to anyone, with this attitude, especially to those who were at the bottom of the ladder of power and position, it was as if they had done those acts of love to Jesus himself.

The same criterion is applied to the unrighteous too. Notice that they are not judged because of some litany of criminal acts, or for committing the seven deadly sins. The only thing the King
says as he judges them is that they failed to act in love,

withholding love when they could have extended it, failing to
notice or to care, passing by with an apathetic shrug in the face of
human need. And to Jesus, it was as if their **failure to love**, their
**not doing**, was a direct and ultimate failure to him. In other
words, according to this parable, when Jesus looks at our **doing**, or
our **not doing**, with regard to the least and last and lost among us,
He takes it personally. What we do… or don’t do… makes a
difference.

“**Not doing**” the **good** is as serious as the “**doing**” of **bad**,  
How often do we fail to think in those terms? We mourn the
broken marriage, floundering because of infidelity. But how many
marriages have been starved to death as spouses withhold
affection, encouragement, and attention over the years? Isn’t that
marriage broken by love **left undone** an unfaithful, broken
marriage too? Or how many acts of injustice have gone unchecked
in our society, like weeds growing in an untended garden, simply
because good people failed to care, or to risk getting involved?

Again and again, we are *undone* by those things we have *left undone*. Our Confiteor says it:

I confess to almighty God,

and to you my brothers and sisters that I have sinned,

in my thoughts and in my words,

in what I have done and what I have failed to do.

Therefore I ask Blessed Mary ever Virgin

All the angels and saints

To pray for me to the Lord our God.

May this be our prayer. And then let leave here going back into the world, loving and serving all we meet in the name and in the power of *our* King, and *theirs*, ever Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.