

Sermon for the Festival of Christ the King (A), 20.xi.05, 10:00
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle, Brogue, Pennsylvania
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46
Holy Eucharist, LBW Setting II with Sacrament of Holy Baptism for Confirmation

J.J.!

GRACE to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✎ Amen.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on the throne of His glory. 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, and He will put the sheep at His right hand and the goats at His left.”

— Matthew 25:31-33

THE image of the Last Judgment in today's Gospel is undoubtedly patterned on the way Jesus and the Community of Saint Matthew imagined the Cæsars, seated on the dais of judgment, the place of final appeal. They would not have had to imagine that scene, for Rome saw to it that each governor of

each province sat in exactly the type of judgment seat at the imperial court. Men like Pontius Pilate were meant to personify the Emperor and the power of the greatest secular power the world has ever known. They were meant to look the part.

When Cæsar and his representatives in each province sat in judgment, they distinguished the guilty from the innocent, the disloyal and rebellious from the loyal, the dishonest from the honest, the violent from the peaceful. Often enough the condemned came from the ranks of the weak, slaves and unruly artisans who could not afford to pay for their defense. In cases of false accusation, Cæsar and his proxy judges had the right to impose that penalty on the accuser that would have been the fate of the accused. In cases of doubt, both accused and accuser could be punished, and often were, a sure-fire way to keep the peace of Rome!

But the Gospel text envisions a greater emperor than that of Rome. The One seated on the throne of glory is the Ruler and

Judge of the whole world, of *all* nations and people. The Cæsars and Roman Governors might have thought of themselves in those terms, but there the similarity ends. This Judge rules like a shepherd of goats and sheep, separating them once he has herded them to market or home from days on good pasture. This image of God *the Shepherd* of Israel comes straight from Ezekiel 34, today's First Reading. In the Prophet Ezekiel's vision, the great Shepherd Who will gather His faithful ones, the whole flock, from all the lands into which they have scattered takes more than a shepherd's interest in His sheep.

In Ezekiel, the Divine Shepherd separates the flock, but not the sheep from the goats. Instead, the Shepherd separates the thin, malnourished, sheep, the ones on the periphery of the flock, constantly butted and pushed out of the best pasture by the dominant, aggressive, well-fed sheep. These excluded ones, these half-starved ones, who wander off into the wilderness

because they do not know where they belong, driven from the flock in which their mothers gave birth to them, are the ones in whom the Shepherd takes a special interest.

Unlike a normal shepherd, who might be content to let the ones that would not bring a good price anyway wander off to their fate, *this* Shepherd goes and gathers in the weak ones, the excluded ones, ones with a broken spirit. In Ezekiel we can almost hear the voice of Jesus in His parable of the Good Shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep to go, to find and to bring back the one lost one. We hear also the Sermon on the Mount, for in Ezekiel it is precisely the nearly lost ones, the worthless ones, the ones with a broken spirit who are especially 'blessed.' "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will *destroy*. I will feed them with *justice*" (Ezekiel 34:16).

But, what sort of 'justice' is *that*?! It is certainly not 'Roman justice,' and it is not the justice of the rulers of this world, either. If it were, tens of thousands of men, women and children who have lost *everything* through earthquake would not be now freezing to death for lack of the bare essentials. No, they are left instead not only as victims of the elements but as prey to the wolves of terrorism who will be able to by their loyalty with a few blankets, tents and bags of meal. If God's justice were ours, the poor among *us* would not be charged the purchase price for a house trailer that probably could not be moved, even if it were worth moving. *Our* poor— who could be many of us if one, or two, or three paychecks were missed through unemployment or illness— *our poor* would not be charged rent for the ground it stands on and then given a fraction of the price they paid for the house trailer when poverty grinds them down so low they have to move on, on to live with friends or family who will put up with them for only so long. The bad news and the good news in

today's Gospel is that, though God's way of finding and lifting up the lost is *not* the way our world works now, God's justice is coming *to* us, coming *toward* us, coming to seek us out and to deal with us as we have dealt with others. That is what we pray for when we pray as Jesus taught us, "Your Kingdom come!"

If we doubt His Kingdom, His reign, the reality of His power, then let us just try to escape His justice. There *is* no escape, no hiding place from the One Who seeks us out, Who separates us from others in our daily lives, on our last day and at the end of days, for His Shepherd's staff touches not only our hide but our hearts, our conscience. There is no wool we can pull over this Shepherd's eyes. We *have*, each of us, driven out those precious to Christ Our Shepherd, our Ruler and our Judge. Through our hypocrisy, our greed and our bigotry, or simply in writing off those who fall outside the narrow circle of our love we can answer for ourselves the question on which side of God's judgment our lives now stand.

Something many Americans find memorable about Europeans is their way of insulting one another. Two great nations located more or less on the west and east banks of the River Rhine are especially adept practitioners of this art. An exchange between them can go something like this: Citizen of nation A: "All you over there on the west bank of the Rhine are a bunch of filthy swine!" "Filthy swine?" retorts the citizen of Country B, "At least I am not a rabid sheep!" Which brings us back to Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25: since we fat and self-satisfied sheep, vicious and rabid in the way we rip those weaker than ourselves, butting them away from what we want, cannot hide from our Shepherd, had we not better seek the ones *He* seeks, and so be found with *them*— when He comes to count His own?

With this child and her family, beginning this very hour, we all have a chance to do just that. We have the chance to surround this life, this tiny lamb of Christ, as yet with no accomplishment to its credit, no power to turn things to our

advantage, with the love and forgiveness with which God has blessed us in Christ. In Cali and in all those who cannot speak for themselves, cannot feed and clothe themselves, in all those who cannot serve us, there, with them, we can find our way back home through the Shepherd Who is Our King, for there and there alone He will find us as His own! ✍ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.
✍ Amen.

S . D . G . !

V . D . M . A .