

Solemnity of Christ the King

Sheep and Goats

November 21-22, 2020/ Cathedral of Saint Paul

Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Matthew 25: 31-46

I am a city boy, through and through whose knowledge of farm animals is pretty much limited to my annual visits to the State Fair. As a result, I am on shaky ground. Scientists will tell you that sheep (*Ovis aries*) have 54 chromosomes, while goats (*Capra aegagrus hircus*) have 60. An observant person notices that goat's tail usually points up; a sheep's tail hangs down.

Sheep are grazers who stay close to the ground for their food, while goats are browsers who climb into all sort of places including perilous crevices in rock cliffs. I saw this firsthand during my trek in Nepal four years ago. In today's Gospel, Jesus separates the two animals and he does so in a manner in which clearly, the goats get the short end of the stick.

Beginning in 1958, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote about the forced labor camps in Russia, in which he uncovered a deep dark secret that needed to be told about the gulags. Someone arrested for teaching the Christian faith could be sent to one of these hidden camps for ten years.

He wrote about the evil present in a government in which those deemed disloyal were shipped away, conveniently forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind, and completely isolated. How could this happen? But he also saw the complexity of the human person and wrote:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?¹

It is very easy to interpret today's parable literally, namely about Jesus separating those in heaven from those deemed unfit for the kingdom.

¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*.

That is in fact, the most logical meaning. Is it the only? Could Jesus be referring to the interior struggles within each one of us? Do we carry on an interior battle within ourselves?

One of the Eastern Fathers, St. Gregory of Nyssa, loved this passage of Scripture and wrote about it. He used the image of a goldsmith who melts the metal to rid it of impurities. He compares this to our souls, “so, while evil is being consumed in the purgatorial fire, the soul that is welded to this evil must inevitably be in the fire too.”²

Perhaps we may benefit from seeing in this parable a commentary about our own lives, rather than merely wondering if we will be judged to be a sheep or goat. Honest souls searching will reveal how we at times behave like each of those creatures. We will face our judgment, but it is the judgment of a merciful Lord, our King to whom we offer our praise and worship on this solemnity, the final Sunday of the liturgical year.

Without question, there will be judgment; I believe that as an article of faith. We are all sinners in need of repentance and grace. God has called us to union with him, even as we recognize that not all will accept the invitation in the end. Jesus is a just judge, but he will exercise that judgment in all fairness, righteousness and truth.

For us to recognize Christ as our King means that we understand Him as **the** true sovereign in our lives. Our faith teaches us that “Christ the Lord already reigns through the Church, but all the things of this world are not yet subject to him.”³ It is at the end of time that the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness, when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, even as we hail Him as our King. He promises to save, to heal and to nourish; he is gentle and humble, and yet he will also triumph once for all over every sovereignty and power.

² St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, chapter 7

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. # 680

In doing so, he ushers in his kingdom in its fullness, a kingdom of truth, life, holiness, grace, justice, love and peace, as we will hear later in today's Preface in the Mass. And today's Gospel invites us to bring about that kingdom by means of our actions towards those most in need, so beautifully articulated in the Gospel.

When we acknowledge the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus in our lives, this does not make us powerless. It only strengthens our witness, for the graces received enable us to overcome all enemies, most notably our own sin and pride.

We are so blessed to have Jesus set before us as our model of our holiness. When we follow him, we can no longer look at the world in the same way. We worship our Lord and King, and Him alone.