

## Sunday before Advent

I take as my text this morning, the second lesson for Morning Prayer, from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, beginning at the 31<sup>st</sup> verse. The entire passage is printed in the bulletin.

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:  
And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth *his* sheep from the goats:  
And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

“Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

We have finally arrived at the last Sunday in Trinity, the longest season of the Church Year, and next Sunday we begin a new year in the Christian Church. I think of this Sunday as the Christian's New Year's Eve.

The exact date of Advent's origin is uncertain, but it probably began as a season of penitence in the fourth century.

With Advent, we not only begin a new year but we also begin a preparation for Christmas, to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, Jesus Christ; but Advent is more than just an anticipation of Christmas: it is the season when we turn our attention as Christians to *The Second Coming* and the *Last Judgment*.

Indeed, the verses from St. Matthew point us toward the *Last Judgment*, illustrated with the parable of the **Sheep and the Goats**.

From time-to-time, what we might call *fanatics* will take up their placards and march through the streets, proclaiming the end is near. Even recently, the end of the world was said to be eminent, with the prediction that a comet would strike the earth, wiping out all life.

To my amusement, so often many religious leaders of various denominations and sects will proclaim they have determined with some certainty just when the *Second Coming* will be; they will say they have determined, as just noted, that the end will occur on a certain date, even at a certain time.

Yes, I do find it amusing, especially so, when we consider that Jesus Himself said:

*...of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.*

Not long ago, in reading about this *Last Judgment*, I was struck by a statement by Claude Beaufort Moss in his book, *The Christian Faith*:

*All will be judged according to what they have done, what they have omitted to do, and what opportunity they have had of doing otherwise.*

That is a statement that truly hits home, for, indeed, throughout our lives we are constantly warned of what we should do, and what we shouldn't do, not only for the sake of salvation, but also for the sake of staying out of trouble legally and socially.

The **Ten Commandments** are explicit in what we should and shouldn't do.

Our whole approach to religious morality and societal standards is based on this one concept of good and bad.

But Moss reminds us of something else of equal importance: what we have omitted to do, and what opportunity we have had of doing otherwise.

The approaching Holidays lend themselves as an illustration of Moss's points.

At Thanksgiving and Christmas, we all make a point of giving a little extra to help provide food and Christmas gifts to those in need, the less fortunate. And this is well and good, even noble.

But, what about the rest of the year? Do we overlook the same needy and less fortunate until the next Holiday Season rolls around?

In our places of work, in our daily chores, in our various activities and happenstance meetings, we have the opportunity of really *Living the Faith*.

It's the spiritual equivalent of taking care of details, and the opportunities are endless.

Another way to look at it is in the context of two often-heard terms: proactive and reactive.

By proactive, I mean making a positive, pre-emptive effort by seeking ways to *Live our Faith*.

Whereas, by reactive, I mean reacting to situations and circumstances, making the determination of good or bad, and then choosing, hopefully, the right course of action or response after the fact.

Of course, we are going to be constantly reacting to temptation and evil. But how much better off we would be spiritually if we were also proactive.

Keeping this in mind, we turn to the ***Last Judgment*** and the **Parable of the Sheep and the Goats** recounted by Matthew, the scene of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. And how fitting, when we look at each as perceived in those days.

Sheep: considered to be mild, simple, innocent, patient, and useful.

Goats: considered to be quarrelsome, lascivious, and ill-scented.

In terms of the Last Judgment, Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, separates the nations into two groups: one, the sheep, to sit on His right hand, the place of honor and favor; the other, the goats, on His left hand, the place of dishonor and shame.

The sheep nations represent those who are beneficent and capable of unconscious and unaffected goodness; innately kind, with inward faith. They are rewarded by being placed on the right hand.

While the goat nations represent those who are riotous, profane, and impure; innately and unconsciously selfish, given up to their own passions and lusts, and who fail to see the needs of others; lacking a heart of compassion. Naturally, they are placed on the left hand.

***Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand,  
Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom  
prepared for you from the foundation of the world,***

and again,

***Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand,  
Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire,  
prepared for the devil and his angels.***

If we are going to be proactive and live our faith, we must have that certain innate quality which allows us to be capable of unconscious and unaffected goodness. Of course, we cannot even approach perfection in our earthly lives, so there is much that will be omitted, and many opportunities lost or overlooked; fortunately, our Judge has lived as one of us, and knows our weaknesses and human frailties, and will judge us accordingly and fairly.

And on what will we be judged?

To paraphrase Moss: We will be judged by what we have done; by what we have failed to do; and missed opportunities.

Biblical scholar and commentator, William Barclay goes further saying that God will judge us according to our reaction to human need. That is, how we have helped others.

Perhaps, this is a much easier concept to take-in. The catch phrase is: ***It's not rocket science.*** It is life at ground level, just as Jesus described it in the **Parable of the Sheep and Goats.**

First: helping others in the simplest ways, as Jesus points out, by feeding a hungry person, giving a drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick: the list goes on, and it is simple things anyone can do. It doesn't involve wealth; it is on a personal level, not to be confused with feeding the thousands and millions in third world countries, which elicits a response on an impersonal level.

Second: it can't be calculating, that is, for the sake of making one's self look good. It must come from the heart.

Third: our Lord points out that such help, when given from the heart, is given to Himself:

*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

In essence, it goes back to the commandment to *love thy neighbor as thyself* and leads us to that basic question, *Who is my neighbor?*

The answer: *He who has need of you.*

The emphasis is placed on love: love of God, love of our Lord Jesus Christ, love of all of God's Creation. Indeed, our salvation is dependent upon our response to God's love, and the acceptance of his Grace.

And, most comforting is that when we are judged in the end, we will be judged lovingly by our Lord Jesus Christ, who knows what it is like to be human, who understands first hand our human failings, our frailty.

Now, as we approach the celebration of Christ's *First Coming*, our hearts are filled with the beauty of that moment, and we are inspired to action. Once inspired, how easy, how simple would it be to carry forth throughout the year.

Thus, with God's Grace, and a lively faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we can look forward in joyful anticipation of our Lord's *Second Coming*, just as we celebrate with joy His *First Coming* into the world 2000 years ago; certain not of the day and the hour, but rather, certain of the Hope for eternal life in the Kingdom He has prepared for us.