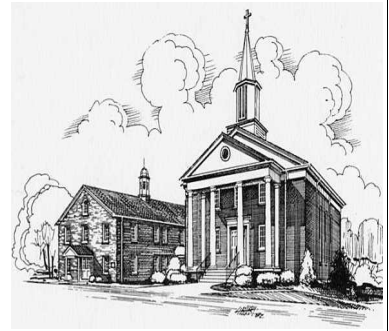


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Last Sunday after Pentecost

Christ the King

Year A

RCL



Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalms 95:1-7a

Matthew 25:31-46

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. 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.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Psalm 95:1-7a Page 724, BCP

Venite, exultemus

- 1 Come, let us sing to the LORD;
 let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.
- 2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving
 and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.
- 3 For the LORD is a great God,
 and a great King above all gods.
- 4 In his hand are the caverns of the earth,
 and the heights of the hills are his also.
- 5 The sea is his, for he made it,
 and his hands have molded the dry land.
- 6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee,
 and kneel before the LORD our Maker.
- 7 For he is our God,
 and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then 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 the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and

gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me 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 nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

SERMON

Tevye, in Fiddler on the Roof, said, “While it's no sin to be poor, it's no great blessing either.” That was Tevye's problem in Anatevka. In 21st Century America, money and its appropriate uses presents a unique challenge. The truth is that we live in an insane place at an insane time of history. We not only can change the channel on the TV without getting up from the couch, but we can change the temperature in the bedroom from that same couch so it's nice and comfy when we go up to bed. However much we wish to follow a Godly life, we are stuck in this insanity like raisins in a fruitcake. How are we to deal with it?

The parables that Jesus spoke frequently contrast the wealthy with the poor, and Ezekiel, for his part, is uncompromising.

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.

Perhaps Tevye is wrong. Perhaps it is a blessing to be poor after all. Truth is, I don't think we're talking about the shekels themselves, but what we do with the shekels – whether we use them to address the suffering in the world or use them for our own indulgences. St. Basil the Great taught:

**The bread you store up belongs to the hungry;
the cloak that lies in your chest belongs to the
naked; the gold you have hidden in the ground
belongs to the poor.**

Whether you don't have enough shekels, like Tevye, or too many, like most of us, money is a challenge. Ezekiel was writing from Babylon. He had been a resident of Anathoth until Nebuchadnezzar II exiled 3,000 Jews to Babylon in 597 b.c.e. Those exiled Jews are the ones he was speaking of when he prophesied about “the lost” and “the strayed”, saying:

**Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for
my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds**

seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land

Babylon had used its shekels to visit calamity upon Judah. I'm sure Nebuchadnezzar thought he had a good reason for doing that and equally sure that those exiled didn't agree with him. Jesus lived some 600 years later. The land of Israel was then occupied by Roman forces who decided who ran the show and how the shekels got shifted. Just speaking generally, I think it fair to imagine that the shekels got distributed in ways beneficial to Rome, rather than in ways that decreased the suffering of the poor and the sick of Israel. This led Jesus to say:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then 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 the left.

Jesus continues:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

It appears that it matters a great deal how we use the shekels we have been given because at the end of Jesus' parable He says:

Then they [the unrighteous] also will answer, Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go

away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Well, that seems pretty clear. Feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe those who have no clothing, tend to the sick, visit those in prison, receive eternal life. Refuse and depart into eternal punishment. Can I confess something to you? I'm terrifically uncomfortable with this explanation. I'm made uneasy over any suggestion that we should be motivated in our activities toward others because it's ultimately in our own interest to do so. It sounds to me like saying you should be good to your children because they're the ones that are going to choose the nursing home you wind up in. We are good to our children because we love them, not because it will benefit us later.

So, it may matter not only that we use the shekels we have been given for the relief of suffering in the world, but that we do so from the proper motivation. If we follow Jesus, who walked the path of a servant to all in obedience even unto

death on the cross, how dare we reduce that path to a simple carrot and stick analogy? We are the body of Christ, Paul reminds us¹. We are the hands and feet and ears and tongue of the Gospel in the world. How can we undertake such a responsibility if our motivation is nothing more than investing for a comfortable retirement? If our work here on earth is not motivated by the same love for others and commitment to our Father evidenced by Jesus, what right do we have to the title Christian? There's a picture going around on Facebook right now. It says

Want to keep Christ in Christmas?

Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Forgive the guilty. Welcome the unwanted. Care for the ill. Love your enemies and do unto others as you would have done to you.

That is just exactly right. Sitting on the sidelines, cheering "Go Jesus!" while becoming grumpy if someone wishes us a Happy Holiday instead of a Merry Christmas does no one any

¹ I Corinthians 12:27

good. It matters how the shekels shift, church, and it matters who bestirs themselves to shift the shekels and why they do so. It matters how we use the assets we have been given, and it matters whether our efforts are other-directed or self-directed. You have a choice, a choice between using your power and your wealth to grow fat, or using them to decrease suffering. Those who use the assets they have been given for their own benefit, the fat and the strong, will be fed with justice, Ezekiel teaches.

We've been made so comfortable by our insane wealth that we can no longer perceive the suffering in the world as anything other than a news item. We've been numbed up and dumbed down by our huge share of the world's shekels. We need some first-hand experience with suffering!

My brother-in-law, the most compassionate, gentle and other-directed man I know, was in Burma with the President last week when he got word of Melissa's death. He told me

on the drive back from the airport of the shocking contrast between the luxurious suite reserved for him and the beggars on the streets of Rangoon. In particular, he remembered a small girl. He gave her twenty dollars American and speculated that it would be enough to buy her a house, but wondered if she got to keep it or if someone was using her to make money from foolish Americans. I wonder, too. Big piles of shekels poison the environment, bringing out the worst in people. There are many who game the system. For many who have been gamed and made to feel ashamed of their impulse to reduce suffering, a kind of cynical blindness sets in. We start to doubt the reality of suffering, even that which happens in front of us.

Once there was a very poor beggar. He shivered on the streets with no warm clothing, no food, no drink. One day a very rich man happened down the street. He could easily have granted relief to the beggar, but he was revolted by the beggar's misery, so he reminded himself of the words of St.

Paul, “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” He then crossed to the other side, feeling he had acted justly.

Just then, a poor man approached. Seeing the beggar’s misery, he felt it as though it was his own. Christ’s story of the widow’s mite came immediately to his mind.

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

Overcome with compassion, he divided his clothing with the beggar, and shared with him his meager ration of food.

We are tasked with being IN the world but not OF the world. We who claim the name Christian are expected to act with the grace of Christ, not the cynicism of the world. It's not easy. In fact, it's so hard, we sometimes just give up!

When we do that, the shekels stop moving and we indulge our own greed. This week, at auction, somebody paid 2.4 million dollars for Napoleon's hat.² That's why I say that big stinking piles of shekels pollute the moral environment.

When you feel your generosity stopped by fears that you are being gamed, and find yourself tempted to withhold your shekels, recall these words from Leo Tolstoy

I have also been deceived by those who said that they only wanted a little money to buy a ticket to return home, and whom I met in the streets again a few days later. Many of them I came to know well, and they knew me; though occasionally having forgotten me, they would repeat the same false tale; but sometimes they would turn away on recognizing me.

In this way I discovered, that, even in this class of men, there are many rogues.

Still, these poor rogues were also very much to be pitied: they were all ragged and hungry; they were of the sort who die of cold in the streets, or hang themselves to escape life, as the papers frequently tell us.

² <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/napoleons-hat-auctioned-south-korean-2-4-million-n249931>

The first beneficiary of compassion is the giver for each act of compassion, each tiny diversion of a few shekels to the alleviation of suffering and away from personal indulgence is a proclamation of the life of Christ. Each gift given changes our hearts ever so slightly from thoughts of me and mine to thoughts of Thee and Thine. It is in acts of compassion that we find the transformation we have been promised.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Why are Ezekiel and Jesus so hard on the rich? St. Francis of Assisi taught:

“Riches prick us with a thousand troubles in getting them, as many cares in preserving them, and yet more anxiety in spending them, and with grief in losing them.”

Living in this insane time and place it is only by the Grace of God and His strength that we can put aside luxury and shift the shekels to the uses of God. Pray for strength, church. Pray for strength.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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