

YES, TODAY IS THE FINAL SUNDAY OF OUR CHURCH'S LITURGICAL YEAR. NEXT WEEKEND WE WILL START A NEW YEAR WITH THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT. ALL DURING THE PAST YEAR WE HAVE BEEN HEARING THE GOSPEL READ TO US AND FOR SOME, ENCOURAGED BY ARCHBISHOP SMITH'S PASTORAL LETTER, BEGINNING TO READ IT FOR OURSELVES TOO. AND, WE HAVE BEEN REFLECTING ON ITS TEACHING USING THE HOMILIES WRITTEN TO BRING ITS MESSAGE TO LIGHT IN OUR LIVES TODAY. IN A SENSE TODAY'S FEAST SUMS UP ALL THAT WE HAVE BEEN HEARING.

THE JESUS WE HAVE WATCHED GOING AROUND TO THE TOWNS OF GALILEE, SAMARIA AND JUDEA, THE JESUS WE HAVE WATCHED TEACHING, HEALING, CONSOLING, LIBERATING IS OUR LORD AND OUR KING. HE IS THE VISIBLE PRESENCE OF ALMIGHTY GOD IN OUR MIDST; THE SON OF GOD DESCRIBED IN PAUL'S LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS WHO WILL HAND OVER THIS EARTHLY KINGDOM TO HIS FATHER.

THE TWO OTHER READINGS TODAY GIVE A VERY DIFFERENT PICTURE OF GOD AND OF JESUS. IN THE FIRST READING GOD DESCRIBES HIMSELF AS A SHEPHERD:

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.

GOD IS PORTRAYED BY THE PROPHET EZEKIEL AS ESPECIALLY CONCERNED WITH THE SHEEP WHICH HAVE GOTTEN LOST.

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.

JESUS HIMSELF TAKES UP THIS IMAGE AND CALLS HIMSELF THE `GOOD SHEPHERD`. HE ALSO COMPARES GOD'S CONCERN FOR THE SINNER WITH A

SHEPHERD WHO LEAVES BEHIND NINETY-NINE GOOD SHEEP TO GO IN SEARCH OF EVEN ONE WHICH HAS GONE ASTRAY AND GOTTEN LOST.

BUT THERE IS A WARNING HERE TOO. THERE ARE OTHERS WHO WILL NOT BE SO WELL TREATED. `THE FAT AND THE STRONG I WILL DESTROY. I WILL FEED MY SHEEP WITH -- JUSTICE. WITH THESE WORDS THE SCRIPTURE EXPRESSES WHAT HAS BEEN CALLED GOD`S PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR. OUR GOD HAS FAVORITES. GOD`S JUSTICE IS BASED ON FAIR AND EQUAL SHARING SO THAT ALL HAVE ACCESS TO THE RESOURCES NECESSARY TO LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL.

AND THAT IS PRECISELY THE POINT OF THE GOSPEL READING FOR TODAY. THE SCENE IS THE FINAL JUDGEMENT. AND IT IS THE MEANING BEHIND THE SCENE WE ARE TO FOCUS ON.

THERE WILL BE TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE COMING BEFORE THE KING FOR JUDGEMENT AND THEY ARE DESCRIBED AS SHEEP AND GOATS, THE GOOD GUYS AND THE BAD GUYS. AND IT IS OBVIOUS THAT BOTH GROUPS ARE SURPRISED AT THE CRITERIA JESUS PRESENTS.

- NONE OF THE THINGS JESUS MENTIONS ARE RELIGIOUS IN NATURE
- THERE IS NO MENTION OF ANY COMMANDMENTS BEING OBSERVED OR VIOLATED
- PEOPLE ARE CONDEMNED NOT FOR DOING ACTIONS WHICH ARE MORALLY WRONG BUT FOR NOT DOING ANYTHING AT ALL
- THE ACTIONS ARE DONE, OR NOT DONE, TO JESUS AND NOT JUST FOR JESUS. IN OTHER WORDS, WE CAN NOW KNOW WITHOUT DOUBT THAT JESUS IS TRULY PRESENT IN EVERY PERSON WE MEET. I AM NOT JUST NICE TO THIS PERSON IN ORDER TO DO A GOOD DEED WHICH SOMEHOW JESUS WILL REWARD AND ADD TO MY LIST OF GOOD WORKS.

AND SO, THE MESSAGE BECOMES ABSOLUTELY CLEAR, IF I WANT TO BE COUNTED AMONG THE SHEEP, THEN I MUST BE AN ACTIVELY LOVING PERSON, NO MATTER WHAT RESPONSE I GET TO MY LOVE. THIS IS THE WAY GOD LOVES ME AND THIS IS THE WAY I AM CALLED TO LOVE IN MY TURN. I AM EXPECTED

TO KEEP GOING OUT OF MY WAY AND REACH OUT IN LOVE, ESPECIALLY TO THOSE IN NEED – THE HUNGRY, THE THIRSTY, THE STRANGER, THE POOR AND NAKED, THE SICK AND THOSE IN PRISON. THESE PEOPLE ARE ESPECIALLY TO BE LOVED PRECISELY BECAUSE THEY ARE THE MOST IN NEED OF HAVING THEIR LIVES TURNED AROUND.

THIS IS THE KING I AM CALLED TO SERVE. AND THE WAY HE WANTS TO BE SERVED IS FOR ME TO BE FILLED WITH CARE AND COMPASSION FOR BROTHERS AND SISTERS EVERYWHERE. I SERVE BY LOVING THOSE WHO ARE MATERIALLY POOR, BUT ALSO BY LOVING THOSE WHO ARE SOCIALLY, PSYCHOLOGICALLY, MORALLY AND SPIRITUALLY POOR.

IN HIS MESSAGE WHEN HE ANNOUNCED THE FIRST WORLD DAY OF THE POOR ON THE FEAST OF ST. ANTHONY, POPE FRANCIS SAID, `LET US LOVE, NOT WITH WORDS BUT WITH DEEDS` WE CELEBRATED THAT DAY LAST SUNDAY. THIS NEW WORLD DAY, THEREFORE SHOULD BECOME A POWERFUL APPEAL TO OUR CONSCIENCES AS BELIEVERS, ALLOWING US TO GROW IN THE CONVICTION THAT SHARING WITH THE POOR ENABLES US TO UNDERSTAND THE DEEPEST TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL. THE POOR ARE NOT A PROBLEM: THEY ARE A RESOURCE FROM WHICH TO DRAW AS WE STRIVE TO ACCEPT AND PRACTICE IN OUR LIVES THE ESSENCE OF THE GOSPEL`.

THE PICTURE OF THE JUDGEMENT IN THE GOSPEL IS NOT MEANT TO MAKE US FEARFUL. NO, IT IS A CHALLENGE AND IT IS NOT ABOUT THE FUTURE IT IS ABOUT TODAY.

SO, IN HIS PASTORAL LETTER OUR ARCHBISHOP CHALLENGES US WITH A QUESTION FOR OUR TIME. WHOSE WORD DO I, IN FACT HEAR AND FOLLOW? MANY DIFFERENT VOICES SPEAK WORDS TO US DAILY. CONSIDER THE INTERNET, TELEVISION, RADIO, BOOKS AND MAGAZINES. WE ARE PUTTING THOSE WORDS INTO PRACTICE WHEN WE ALLOW THEM TO INFLUENCE AND SHAPE OUR WAYS OF THINKING AND LIVING. YET, THERE IS ONLY ONE VOICE THAT WE KNOW IS FULLY WORTHY OF OUR TRUST. THAT IS THE VOICE OF JESUS. TO BE DISCIPLES AND TO LIVE OUR BAPTISMAL CALL IS TO ALLOW ONLY HIS WORDS TO GUIDE AND DIRECT OUR LIVES.

A FABLE, BY SOREN KIERKAGARD (A DANISH PHILOSOPHER), FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES TO HELP US TO UNDERSTAND THIS FEAST DAY...

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A KING. AS WITH ALL KINGS IN HIS TIME HE HAD ABSOLUTE POWER OVER HIS SUBJECTS.

ONE DAY HE WAS RIDING THROUGH THE COUNTRY SIDE AND HE SAW A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN IN ONE OF HIS VILLAGES. THE KING DECIDED HE MUST MARRY HER FOR HE HAD FALLEN IN LOVE. BUT NOW HE FACED A DILEMMA. SHOULD HE SHOWER HER WITH GIFTS AND ASK HER TO MARRY HIM. HE DID HAVE THAT POWER AND SHE COULD NOT REALLY SAY NO.

BUT THE KING WANTED TO KNOW THAT SHE LOVED HIM SO HE REALIZED THAT HE COULD NOT USE HIS WEALTH AND POWER TO MAKE HER HIS BRIDE. NEXT, HE THOUGHT HE MIGHT DISGUISE HIMSELF AS A PEASANT AND TRY TO WIN THE YOUNG WOMAN'S LOVE. BUT HE REJECTED THAT PLAN TOO FOR THEN THEIR RELATIONSHIP WOULD BE BASED ON A DECEPTION, A LIE. FINALLY, THE KING KNEW WHAT HE MUST DO. HE BECAME AN ORDINARY PERSON, INTRODUCED HIMSELF TO THE YOUNG WOMAN AND TOGETHER THEY GREW TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND WERE MARRIED.