

“The Lord will reign forever and will give his people the gift of peace.” [Ps 29:10-11]

A. EZEKIEL 34:11-12,15-17-- The Context. This book opens in 593 B.C. with Ezekiel already in exile, deported to Babylon. [RG, 258] **Today's text** comes from a long tradition of referring to kings as shepherds. In the verses just before today's portion, the prophet relates God's displeasure with Israel's shepherds, i.e.kings who have led his flock astray. **God promises to depose these kings and to look after his flock himself, leading them from foreign lands back to Israel.** [TCB, 1066]

B. PSALM 23:1-3,5-6--The Context. This psalm portrays **God's loving care under the figure of a shepherd for the flock** and a host's generosity toward a guest (Exodus traditions). [TCB 661]

C. I CORINTHIANS 15:20-26,28 The Context: Paul wrote this book around 56 A.D. to address a church struggling to live in the midst of a pagan society. The death and resurrection of Christ forms the basis for Christian faith. Corinthians struggled to accept this. [RG, 406] **In today's text** Paul states emphatically, **“If Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain.”** After a triumphant assertion of the reality of Christ's resurrection, Paul explains its positive implications in human and cosmic dimensions. **Jesus' resurrection logically and necessarily involves ours as well.** [TCB, 271]

D. MATTHEW 25:31-46--The Context: This gospel was written sometime circa 70-90 A.D. by Matthew, a Greek speaking convert in Antioch Syria writing for a Jewish Christian audience. He traces Jesus' origins back into Jewish history and has great interest in showing that Jesus is the promised messiah. [RG, 314] **In today's pericope** Matthew portrays the final judgment. **The criterion of judgment will be the deeds of mercy that have been done for the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters.** [TCB, 55]

WHAT IS GOD SAYING TO ME PERSONALLY TODAY?

There are two very contrasting images of Christ presented to us in today's readings. In the Second Reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul presents **a powerful and awesome picture of Christ as Lord and King.** As all have died because of the fall of Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. Christ is presented as the all-powerful ruler to whom every other power and authority must eventually give way. And the last enemy to be destroyed will be death. **Christ represents life and he wants to share that life with every single person.**

The other two readings, however, give a very different picture of God and Jesus, who is his visible incarnation. The First Reading presents **God as a shepherd.** We know that sheep, which are brought out onto hillsides to graze, can wander far in search of the best grass. This would be especially true in the arid hills of Palestine. Not only that, there will be sheep belonging to other shepherds out on the same hills and they can get mixed up with each other. The shepherd then spends considerable time looking after his own straying sheep and bringing them back. Jesus will also compare 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 got lost.

But 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.”** God is biased. He is biased against those who exploit the weaker and poorer members in their society. **Justice for God is not just based on moral rectitude.** It is rather **based on an equitable sharing and access to the resources** available and necessary for a life of dignity and self-respect.

We remember the parable of the rich man clothed in purple and dining sumptuously every day. At the foot of his table sat a poor man, covered in sores, his wounds licked by dogs, who longed to have even the crumbs that fell from the table. Perhaps the rich man went to the temple regularly,

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perhaps he observed all the festivals and requirements of his religion. But he did nothing for the man at his feet. **And that was his sin: he did nothing.** This is the greatest sin of all.

And that is precisely the point in the Gospel reading for today. The scene is the final judgment. **There will be two kinds of people coming for judgment**, described respectively as **'sheep' and 'goats'**. And how are the good and the bad guys to be distinguished from each other? Jesus gives the criteria for judgment:

"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 turning to the goats, whom he calls "accursed", **he condemns them for not doing any of the things he mentioned above and for not recognizing Jesus in their brothers and sisters.**

Notice this:

- (1) none of the things Jesus mentions are religious in nature;
- (2) there is no mention whatever of any commandments being observed or violated;
- (3) people are condemned not for doing morally wrong actions, **but for doing nothing at all;**
- (4) the actions **are done (or not done) TO Jesus** and not just FOR Jesus. **In other words, Jesus is truly present in every person I meet.** I am not just nice to this person (whom I may not care about very much) in order to do a "good act" which Jesus will reward and add to my bank account of "good works". People cannot be used, even for spiritual purposes.

To sum up, Jesus is saying that, if I wish to be counted among the sheep, then **I must be an actively loving person, irrespective of the response I get to my love. This is the way God loves me.** It is not enough just to fulfill obligations, religious or otherwise. It won't do to say, "I am a good enough Catholic". **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, those in prison or imprisoned in nursing homes. It does not matter how they got sick (acquiring AIDS through a sexually promiscuous lifestyle, overindulgence in alcohol or nicotine) or why they are in prison (murder, rape of a young girl, terrorism...). These people are especially to be loved **because they are the most in need of having their lives turned round.** This is the King I am called to serve. The picture of the Judgment in the Gospel is **a challenge not about the future but about today. The surest way to guarantee that I will be numbered among the sheep is for me to become right now a loving, caring, tolerant, accepting person.** Help me, Lord, to seek and find and respond to you in every person and in every experience of this day. [Frank Doyle, SJ]

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

Am I willing to step out of my comfort zone to offer my help to people that I do not like?	Will I ask Jesus in prayer each day to help me to recognize HIM in each person I meet?	Will I begin to seek out in love: the sick, the imprisoned, the lonely thirsting for a friend?	Will I pray today and every day for the grace to accept the challenge of this gospel?
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[Sources: Scripture readings- *The Catholic Bible, NAB translation, Home Study Edition, (TCB)*, and its Reading Guide (RG); *The Jewish Study Bible, Tanakh Translation, [JSB]* Jewish Publication Society; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, (NJBC)* 1990 edition; J.L.McKenzie, SJ, *Dictionary of the Bible (DB)*; Wm Barclay, Matthew, *The Daily Bible Study Series [DBSS]*; *Sunday Scripture Reflections* by Frank Doyle, SJ at www.sacredspace.ie/livingspace. [Editor: Michael Hosemann].