

We Want to Be Sheep and Not Goats

Ez. 34: 11-12, 15-17; 1 Cor. 15: 20-26, 28; Matt. 25: 31-46

This Sunday, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of Christ the King, the last Sunday of our church year. Next Sunday, we begin the season of Advent and our liturgical calendar begins again.

The Gospel gives us a chance to reflect not only on the passage of the year, but also on the end of our lives here on earth and on the end of the world; the End Times. Every Sunday when we profess the Apostles' Creed, we say that Jesus will come again in glory 'to judge the living and the dead'. These words form part of our core beliefs as Catholics.

The Gospel reminds us of Jesus' second coming at an unknown time in the future when He will gather everyone together and separate the sheep from the goats. Based on the images that we see in picture books, we might think that it is easy to tell the difference between the two animals, but, apparently, in the Middle East and Africa, sheep and goats can look very similar. For the untrained person, it can be difficult to separate the two, but a shepherd can tell the difference.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will be able to tell the sheep from the goats. How? He will know by the extent to which we have followed His commandment to love our neighbour as ourself; especially the least of our brothers and sisters, the marginalized in our society. The sheep will have followed His commandment while the goats will have gone their own way.

Whenever I read Matthew's account of the 'Final Judgement', I cannot help but think of Michelangelo's interpretation in a painting that occupies most of a wall at one end of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. In the centre at the top of the picture is Jesus with His mother beside Him surrounded by the communion of saints. At the left side of the painting (on Jesus' right side), the dead rise from their graves and are transported up to heaven. As they gaze up towards heaven with joy and expectation, they are helped by the angels and saints who are extending helping hands and drawing them up as you would help a friend up a steep mountain.

On Jesus' left side, poor souls are being cast down. Their faces are contorted with the effort of struggling to reach heaven while angels are punching them down and grotesque demons are dragging them down to their final destination. The faces of the unfortunate reflect not only the struggle of trying to overcome the forces dragging them down but also the fear of what awaits them in the nether world. It is indeed a fearsome prospect.

But we should not live in fear of the Final Judgement. We know that we can rely on the infinite mercy and compassion of God. After all, God sent His only Son, Jesus, to live among us and to die for us so that we might be saved.

In the Gospel for last Sunday, Jesus told the parable of the talents through which He reassured us of the importance of trying to use the treasures we are all given to make a 'profit' for Him. The worst sin was not to try; to do nothing.

We can take comfort in the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which assure us that: 'God predestines no one to go to hell...in the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of the faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance.'

At every Mass, there is a Eucharistic Prayer. The Prayer may take several forms but the first form contains the following words:

'Therefore, Lord, we pray: graciously accept this oblation of our service, that of your whole family; order our days in your peace, and command that we be delivered from eternal damnation and counted among the flock of those you have chosen.'

In spite of our sins and failures, we implore Jesus to look upon our efforts to follow His commandment to serve and to see us as sheep to be chosen to enter the kingdom of God.