

Proper 29, A (Christ the King)
November 20, 2011
St. James, La Jolla

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24
Matthew 25: 31-46

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.

I.

Italy, Spain, Greece: each teeter on the brink of economic catastrophe which could up-end our brittle financial world. The frustrated and the angry occupy Wall Street, San Diego, and Oakland in protests that seem to be getting more ragged and potentially violent. The poor keep getting poorer; the rich richer. These are times of great travail. Even within this relatively affluent community, we know people who are affected.

And while this is happening, the church seems to be a flimsy anchor in the storm. Membership, church attendance, and giving have dropped across denominations. It is as if the very fabric of society is unraveling. Things feel as though they are falling apart.

In another time, in a faraway land, another people saw things similarly, if not worse. Their religious community was not simply in decline; it was

ripped apart as their Temple was literally toppled. The nation and its economy were not simply imperiled; they were utterly destroyed. And the privileged were packed off to live in a foreign place. It is to this people of Judah, a defeated, kingless nation, that God speaks through the exiled prophet, Ezekiel. Filled with the Spirit of the Lord, Ezekiel offers an unbelievable word of hope to those in despair, justice to the oppressed, protection for the kingless.

Today, on this Feast of Christ the King, we are heirs to Ezekiel as we receive that same Spirit. In our world of woe, God's spirit moves. Today is an abundant celebration of the Spirit of God. Certainly, it comes as it does every Sunday as we hear God's word in Holy Scripture. It comes when we break open the bread of Eucharist and know Jesus as present in our midst. As we partake of this communion. We become what we eat: the body of Christ for each other and the world. But there is more on this day, much, much more.

For on this day, we make solemn vows to God to be this Body through the Baptismal Covenant. We bless the waters of baptism and we bring those "who come in faith and baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son,

and of the Holy Spirit.” And others who have already been bathed in those waters at an early age now make their own personal and profound affirmation of faith and commit to live life as followers of Jesus Christ. God is up to something. God’s work abounds and God’s Spirit is descending with great power and might. All of us will be bathed in the Holy Spirit.

II.

Through this spiritual bath and the solemn vows that we make, we are invited into a new reality—a new kingdom with a new king. We are invited to think and act in very different ways. We are invited to a moment of repentance. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means to turn around and change directions. Guided by a God who will act as a shepherd of the sheep, the exiles of Judah were called to change directions to forsake the past ways of Israel, where, in an eerily similar way, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. As the prophet stated in an earlier prophesy, “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep...With force and harshness you have ruled them.” Indeed, in today’s reading, the shepherding Lord is also the judging one, who will “judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.”

And in our gospel, in Jesus' last teaching from the Mount of Olives before his arrest and all that follows, he echoes Ezekiel by describing the day of reckoning. Jesus' meta point is unmistakable. Our actions have consequences. We are invited to choose life. We are invited to be citizens of a very different kingdom. Jesus is our good shepherd, to be sure. This Jesus embodies pure love—sacrificial, hard-wood-of-the-cross love. But this is also the Jesus who judges us worthy of the kingdom.

And here Jesus states the solitary standard for kingdom citizenship, that is, entrance into the kingdom of heaven. And this standard is not related to right theology, carefully worded creeds, right biblical interpretation, or any particular notion of orthodoxy. The standard is at once mystical and simple. It is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you did something about their need.

The more evangelical among us might talk about knowing Jesus or having a personal relationship with Jesus. What Jesus says here is that if you want to have a relationship with me, then meet the poor, the needy, the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned. That is where we find Jesus. It is gritty and dirty

work. Indeed, it is the life of those who prepare to live in the kingdom of heaven.

III.

And so, on this day of the Spirit, we are invited to a moment of repentance. We are invited to change directions. God is up to something in this age and on this day. God is calling God's church, and us, to prepare for the kingdom by following a life worthy of that kingdom. Our spiritual disciplines are found in the promises that we make.

We are to be a community gathered that learns of Jesus, breaks bread and prays. We are to be those who repent, who change directions. We are to tell this good news of the kingdom. And we are to search relentlessly for Jesus in our neighbor. We build the kingdom in this world through justice, peace, and dignity. These are our solemn vows. They will cause you to be like the shepherd we follow. You will need to get dirty. You will need to take risks.

In our diocese, situated as we are on an international border—a veritable fence that acts as another kind of poverty line, where 15 percent of our brothers and sisters live below the poverty line, and where our military

families grapple with separation and returning service persons with physical, emotional and spiritual scars, we have abundant places to search for our king. We can follow the way of our shepherding king who never saw a boundary that he was unwilling to transcend. We can echo his fearless, hard-wood-of-the-cross love. It will be a moment of repentance and turning. In the end, it will make all the difference.

IV.

In another time and place, one of the saints of our church gives us an image of just what such a moment of turning can look like. While Martin of Tours was still a soldier in the Roman army and deployed in Gaul (modern day France), he experienced the vision that became the most-repeated story about his life. One day as he was approaching the gates of the city of Amiens he met a scantily clad beggar. He impulsively cut his own military cloak in half and shared it with the beggar. That night, Martin dreamed of Jesus wearing the half-cloak he had given away. He heard Jesus say to the angels: “Here is Martin, the Roman soldier who is not baptized; he has clad me.” “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.” Indeed.

Let me conclude with a myth that may finally connect the dots. It offers a description of heaven and hell. It goes something like this. Heaven and hell are one place. It is a great and sumptuous feast where before everyone is placed every wonderful and great food in endless supply. Each person has fastened to their hands incredibly long forks with which they cannot reach their mouths. Those in hell are eternally frustrated and see nothing in their fury but their own unrelenting hunger, even as others try to feed them. Those in heaven only try to feed others and rejoice in the plenty of the banquet as they accept the gifts of others.

V.

In the end, our world is the world of Ezekiel and his companions in Babylon. On this day, we reaffirm our citizenship, even though we live in exile awaiting our kingdom come. In the meantime, we search our king. And we know where to search.

It is said that we die as we live. How we live in this life that will determine how we live in the life to come. The compassion of Jesus invites us to live into a world of discovering Jesus in the one who suffers. In doing so, we are

formed and trained into a life of compassion. We then move to the kingdom through our own passion. This is truly living. Thus living, we begin to see the kingdom of heaven appearing around us. Indeed, living in this way, we find our true shepherd and king. We experience a glimpse of the kingdom, of heaven, in this world as we expectantly await the end of our exile and a return home. Now, let us prepare for the banquet of the king.