

Cycle A 34th or Last Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King

Reading I, Ez 34:11-12, 15-17

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark. I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord GOD. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly. As for you, my sheep, says the Lord GOD, I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats.

Responsorial Psalm, Ps 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6

R. (1) The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. In verdant pastures he gives me repose.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul. He guides me in right paths for his name's sake.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for years to come.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Reading II, 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28

Brothers and sisters: Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through man, the resurrection of the dead came also through man. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ; then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. When everything is subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.

Gospel, Mt 25:31-46

Jesus said to his disciples: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who 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 drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'

And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, 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 no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Hell is real...It exists...There is no doubt.

In today's Gospel parable, He warns that those who neglect the needs of the poor will go off "*to eternal punishment.*" Would it surprise you to know the Biblical figure who speaks most often of Hell and damnation is none other than Jesus Himself? Time and again in the Gospels, Jesus warns about "Gehenna" and the everlasting fire. Today when the Church says that Hell exists, it means that rejecting God's love is a real possibility. "Gehenna" or "Hell" are images for the lonely and sad condition of our free will to refuse the offer of the divine life. But, is there anyone in this state of being we ask? The Church has never claimed to know if any human being is actually in Hell. We don't know for sure. So, there is a question about Hell that I find fascinating and pertinent to the Scriptures today. "Is Hell empty or full?" A controversy in 2011 percolated around a book published by well-known evangelical preacher Rob Bell. In Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived, Bell advocates the "universalist" position on salvation, where everyone in the end is saved and that Hell, accordingly, is empty.

Over the years our great Catholic theologians have powerfully stated positions on Hell. In the 3rd century, Origen of Alexandria, who is a remarkable and influential theologian in our Catholic tradition, stated that all sinners—and indeed even the fallen angels, perhaps even Satan himself—would be, through Christ's grace, brought to salvation in the end. There might be hellfire, Origen thought, but it cannot be everlasting. For if it were, sin would prove more powerful than God's grace. Well, the Church rejected Origen's universalism for she saw it as disrespectful of free will, both human and angelic. If God's grace is simply irresistible, then the real freedom to reject God's love is compromised.

In the wake of this condemnation, theologians moved to the other end of the spectrum. St. Augustine, 5th century bishop of Hippo, held that original sin had produced a *massa damnata* (a damned mass) of human beings, out of which God, in his inscrutable grace, has picked a few privileged souls. Thus, Augustine clearly believed that the vast majority of the human race would be damned to Hell. St. Thomas Aquinas, followed Augustine in holding that a very large number of people are Hell-bound; Aquinas even taught that among the pleasures that the saints

in heaven enjoy is the contemplation of the suffering of the damned!

Then, in the 12th century, the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar argued another viewpoint. He said that given what God has accomplished in Christ, we may reasonably hope that all will be saved. The prior condemnation of Origen's doctrine did however compel him to hesitater from saying that we actually know for certain that all will be saved. But von Balthasar's keen sensitivity to the dramatic power of the Cross convinced him that we may have the realistic hope that all, human and angelic, will eventually be drawn into God's divine love. In 2024, Pope Francis was asked what he thought about hell. The pope responded that hell is "difficult to imagine" and added that, in his personal opinion, he "likes to think hell is empty; I hope it is." There are many theologies, but only one faith. So who is right?

Today is the last Sunday of the Church year when we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. Next week we will begin the new Church year starting with Advent, our time waiting for the birth of Jesus into the world. Although death and sorrow and sin had been on the rampage though out history, Christmas is the season that we celebrate Jesus bringing light and peace and wholeness into the world.

The Gospel parable today tells us who will receive this light and peace. The standard is very clear. Have we cared for the hungry? Have we given water to the thirsty? What about welcoming the stranger, and giving clothes to those with none? And what about visiting people in a hospital or prison? This is what Jesus did in his life on earth. And, these are the loving outreach ministries that He has entrusted to us who are His body.

If we have not joined this group, if we are stubborn in our free will to reject God, we should not be surprised when at the end of our lives God says, *"You never did pass on to others the love I gave to you. You did not let me into your life. If you had, your gratitude would have prompted you to care for others! I would love to shepherd you even now, but here is what I can do: First, I will affirm the choice you have made with your life, even if you have chosen to live without me, your God, I will respect your choice. Second, I will never stop loving you, nor leave you!"*

You see, this is how a King acts. He respects and honors his subjects' needs and desires. The parable says that not everyone will be among God's beloved herd of sheep. Some people will be goats instead. But, where does it say that God stops loving us even if we stubbornly banish ourselves to Hell? In fact, in Romans St. Paul tells us that our gift of faith is the enactment of God's mercy, not our human will, that decides. And, he continues *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* And, I say, "I agree!"

The existence of Hell very real. Some say that God "sends" people to Hell , but this is misleading. As C.S. Lewis put it so memorably: *"the door that closes us into Hell is locked from the inside, not from the outside."* We humans are free to choose, yes, and there can be no doubt that rejecting God's divine love has consequences and results in suffering. Yet, we may, indeed we should hope as Pope Francis did, that God's grace, in the end, will transform even the worst sinner...on earth, or in Hell. My mother and my wife's love have helped me understand this concept of how love can transform us.

Many Catholics think that von Balthasar was on the right track. Our Catholic doctrine is that Hell exists. Yet, we don't know for sure if anyone is actually in Hell. However, we are permitted to hope and to pray that all sinners, even those in Hell, will finally be transformed by the constant love and mercy of God's grace.

So what matters to us today? Jesus said it in today's Gospel: *"...whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me."* Like Jesus, our identity here on earth is not found in what we do for ourselves, it is found in what we do for others. And just as Jesus touched people, we have opportunities to touch others throughout our lives. All we have to do is participate in caring for others. In fact, I would go so far as to say we can't live without God and each other in our lives!

Never doubt that through our efforts, the grace of Christ the King is changing the world. And, somewhere He is transforming a sinner with His love and forgiveness.

God's love is real....It exists....There is no doubt!