

CHRIST THE KING A

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

READING II 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28

GOSPEL Mt 25:31-46

The image of the shepherd commonly describes the king who truly provides for his subjects in both the Bible and ancient Near East. Ezekiel uses this image in his preaching after the fall of Jerusalem (586 B.C) in order to offer a message of hope to the exiles. In vv 11-16, God will look after the flock himself. He will also bring them back from captivity to their own land. In so doing, he will devote special attention to the weak and wounded: Those neglected by the Judean establishment. In vv 17-22, Ezekiel presents The Lord God as shepherd in a judicial role. The Lord God now passes judgment on all who took advantage of his sheep and mistreated them, especially those in upper classes. They will not escape judgment.

In this section, First Corinthians 15, Paul develops the implications of Christ's resurrection. Because Christ returned from the dead, humans can also return. Jesus, then, is "the first fruits." Because of Christ's resurrection, humans are no longer condemned to live a false form of life ("death"), which began with Adam and to which they contributed by their own sins. Real existence is now "life" in Christ. There is, however, this period of time between Christ's resurrection and the general resurrection. The latter can occur only after the exalted Christ has totally subjugated all those forces opposed to genuine existence. When this victory over "death" occurs, Christ will hand over the kingdom to the Father and give back the authority bestowed on him for his mission.

In this scene of the final judgment, Matthew reveals the implications of the vigilance and fidelity mentioned throughout the parables of chapters 24-25. Vigilance and fidelity are now reduced to recognizing the Son of Man in those whom the world disregards: The hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, ill, imprisoned. The standard or basis of judgment is the recognition or non-recognition of those sisters and brothers of the Son of Man.

Jesus appears in all the trappings of regal splendor. As king, he sits upon the royal throne. He also exercises his kingship by his role as shepherd. Just as a shepherd separates sheep from goats at night, so the Son of Man separates the blessed from the condemned. Fittingly, the sheep enjoy the place of honor on the right while the goats are placed on the left.

In the dialogue with the two groups, what emerges is a Christological criterion. The Son of Man—the King/Shepherd—identifies with all those who suffer. The "least ones" are not to be limited to Christians. Within the context of the judgment, the "least ones" are all who experience any form of need. The Christological criterion thereby becomes ecumenical.

Damaged goods are the royal emblem. We choose to avoid the "lower classes" because they ostensibly have no claim on us. We prefer to disassociate ourselves from the poor and suffering since the welfare system will provide for them. We tend to muffle the cry of the indigent because they apparently have no right to upset our peace. In all such cases, we fail to uncover the image of God the king, the master of disguises. We do not realize that damaged goods are the royal emblem.

For Ezekiel, Yahweh must intervene because the upper classes particularly have neglected the demands of covenant. They have refused to become involved in the plight of fellow Israelites. As King/Shepherd, The Lord God provides for the lost, the strayed, the weak. As King/Shepherd, he also condemns the leaders of his people for not recognizing him in the needs of the sheep. For Ezekiel, damaged goods are the royal emblem.

For Matthew, those on the left have disparaged the image of the king. Jesus, the King/Shepherd, is equated with the outcasts and the neglected of society. To alleviate the suffering of such people is to uncover the image of Jesus. To refuse concern is to refuse allegiance to the King/Shepherd. Jesus is reflected in all who stand in need of help of whatever kind. For Matthew, damaged goods are the royal emblem.

Leaders who react to the injustices suffered at the hands of oppressive governments recognize the presence of the king. Those who work patiently and reverently with the handicapped acknowledge the subjects of the king. Those who meet the needs of the elderly and the dying witness to the image of the king. Those who fight prejudice of whatever form revere the insignia of the king. These and all those who strip away the facade to discover the sisters and brothers of Jesus affirm that damaged goods are the royal emblem.

Eucharist deals with the presence of God. Eucharist proclaims the presence of God under the forms of bread and wine. Eucharist challenges the community to transfer this vision of faith to all other segments of communal living. Eucharist insists that the presence of God is to be uncovered/discovered elsewhere. Eucharist testifies that damaged goods are the royal emblem.