

# Christ the King Sunday

## JUDGMENT DAY

Matthew 25:31-46

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By Steven E. Albertin

31When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40And the king will answer them, '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.' 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

44Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Passing Judgment**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Making Our Case***

Both today's Gospel and today's occasion provide the ultimate horizon of the church's confession and teaching: the Last Judgment. If there is no final reckoning, if Christ and his message have no ultimate significance, if Christ is not King and his promise is not "the last word," then the Gospel is just one of many "gospels" cluttering the pantheon of the world. Its god is one of many "gods" begging for our hearts. In our post-modern world of religious diversity, take your pick. One god is as good as another. They are all about the same thing: offering us blessings in exchange for our goodness. All promise to get us to the same place. All offer us a way to make our case on Judgment Day, regardless of how differently they understand that final and decisive day of reckoning. As long as we do what the gods demand, as long as we can make our case, we are OK. We can breathe easier.

That is the problem: making our case. Lurking on the horizon of them all is the specter of a final judgment. To the degree that we fail to please the gods, Judgment Day is dangerous and threatening. Even though today's Gospel specifically directs its message to the church and not the world, the threat of Judgment Day haunts us all. Everyone is compelled to make their case to someone, something or some god, even if it is only their own

conscience.

Today's Gospel portrays that universal threat in the parable of the sheep and goats. Like the herdsman separating his sheep from the goats at the end of the day, the final separation looms. The criterion for separation, the evidence for us or against us, depends on how well we have helped the poor and neglected of this world. Even pious pagans would applaud such a noble and moral expectation. Everyone senses that the presence of the poor and neglected demands some kind of caring response. To the degree that we can "help" them, we can successfully make our case to whomever or whatever we must justify our lives.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Why Didn't You Tell Us?***

"But why didn't you tell us?" The question sticks out like a sore thumb in this parable. The Judge's verdict surprises both the sheep and the goats. They never expected that their treatment of the poor and neglected would be the decisive evidence in determining their fate. Both failed to see the presence of Jesus, the Son of Man, in "the least of these." The goats' question almost seems like a complaint: "Why didn't you tell us? If we had only known, then we would have behaved differently, then we would have cared for them." However, that really means, "We will care for others only if it benefits us." (The sheep's question also expresses a kind of incredulity. However, it is incredulity of a very different sort. See Step 2 below.)

The goats' complaining question reveals the true source of their inaction: their unbelief! They do not really give a rip about the poor. They do not really care about Jesus. They only care about themselves and their own fate. Even if they had known that Jesus was in "the least of these," even if they had seen Jesus in the poor and neglected, their altruism would still have only

been a pious disguise for their selfishness. Because of their self-absorbed lives, no wonder they can't see past the ends of their own noses. No wonder they could not see Jesus in "the least of these."

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *It's Too Late!***

When the Son of Man finally shows up, whether it be on the Last Day or on that day when we breathe our last, it's too late to change anything! Judgment Day had already begun to take place a long time ago. Our failure to attend to the needs of "the least of these" has already exposed us for the goats we are. Neglecting "the least of these" meant neglecting Jesus. Neglecting Jesus meant neglecting the Judge who sent Him. Neglecting the Judge is dangerous and deadly!

The time for excuses is over. It's too late to make a case for ourselves. What had previously been hidden and unseen is now visible to all. Judgment has been passed. We are goats . . . and it's too late to change!

## **PROGNOSIS: Passing Judgment . . . Again**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Making a Case FOR US***

Even though God has already passed judgment on the goats, God is not content to let dead goats lie. Even though we deserve to suffer the consequences of our faithless self-absorption and cruel indifference to "the least of these," God will not let God's love be thwarted. God comes again "to judge the living and the dead," to save and redeem. Even though we had failed to see Him in "the least of these," God will not lose sight of us. God comes again to judge but this time judges differently. This time God comes literally as one of "the least of these." As a lowly babe in Bethlehem, as an ordinary carpenter's son from an ordinary place in Galilee, as the friend of sinners and outcasts, as the despised and rejected crucified messiah, he

comes to love the damnable goats of this world. He comes to reverse the verdict we goats deserve. Jesus will not reject us even though we have rejected him. Jesus will make a case for us to his “father,” the God and Judge of heaven and earth. He offers himself “for us” and suffers the fate we deserve.

Surprise! The Judge is impressed with the case Jesus has made for us. The Judge raises Jesus from the dead and reverses his verdict on all us damnable goats who deserve nothing other than “eternal punishment.” God passes judgment on us in the same way God passes judgment on Jesus. Thumbs up! God offers that new verdict to us in water, bread and wine, in the forgiveness of sins and in the telling and retelling of Jesus’ story. The terror of Judgment Day is undone. Death becomes life. Damnation becomes salvation. Goats become sheep.

**Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Thanks For Telling Us!*

This promise makes it possible for us to hear and see things differently. We sing, “Jesus, thanks for telling us. We would never have figured it out on our own.” As a result, we no longer live in fear of the End. We joyously anticipate the completion of what has already begun. In Word and Sacrament, Judgment Day has begun. The ultimate Judge of all persons and things offers us Jesus’ fate and destiny. Trusting that promise, we no longer have to make our case and prove our worth. No longer preoccupied with ourselves we do not need to keep score or worry about who is watching. What was once hidden, we now can see. There in “the least of these” we see Jesus.

We did not expect this. We are utterly surprised! Who would have ever thought that we would meet Jesus like this...in “the least of these?”

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *It’s Not Too Late*

We no longer need to live in fear that “it’s too late.” We no longer need to be goats preoccupied with our own fate afraid that we will never be good enough. We no longer have to worry about who is judging or who is counting, even God. Jesus has settled that all for us. Christ is King! Jesus has the last word.

Therefore, we can give hope to “the least of these.” It’s not too late for them either. We freely serve their needs not for some ulterior, self-serving motive. They need help. We give it. In so doing, we both are blessed. They will see Jesus in us. We will see Jesus in them. We both rejoice, “It’s not too late!”