

**Homily for November 21, 1999  
Feast of Christ the King Cycle A**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17  
1 Corinthians 15:20-26,28  
Matthew 25:31-46**

## *We don't earn our place with God... ever.*

At last! ...Judgement day! Finally, all the evil ones will be punished and the good ones rewarded...and of course, we know who's good and who's evil. ...At least that's our popular way of looking at judgement...a way quite similar to the Jewish community to whom Jesus spoke and which he turned completely upside down.

Here we are ushered into the great place of judgement before the Mighty King – Lord of heaven and earth. The usual understanding was that one would be rewarded for meritorious works performed on earth. In addition, all injustice done to a person would be rectified. Indeed, it was then the belief that appropriate records were kept in the “Book of Life.” Behind this was the abiding conviction that justice was not an illusion despite what the powers of this world often did to the righteous. As judge, the Son of man quickly separated the sheep from the goats. In Palestine, the sheep and goats commonly grazed together during the day, but were separated at night. The sheep, being more valuable, symbolize the righteous. They are on the right, the traditional side of favor.

But here, everything goes wrong and all our expectations of certitude that we manufacture are dashed. There is no record of virtuous deeds that a person may point to when suing for justice. In this court, both the blessed and the condemned are unaware of what really matters. Yet this becomes the measure of justice. Neither the blessed nor the condemned are able to assign any lasting significance to the very acts that determine their destiny. Yet it is by these acts that their fates are sealed.

Such a judgement flies in the face of our usual understanding of justice. Justice is supposed to be something clear-cut. A person wants to be sure of standing in the right, even in adversity. But that is why this scene is so surprising. Both sides are astonished that the Son of man does not share their notion of justice, their concept of balancing the books – that we could know with certitude where we stand and why we stand there.

Furthermore, the scene is not actually one of judgement but of ratification. The Son of man does not make the final judgement; he merely confirms the depth of their actions. The hope that human action does have lasting significance is upheld, but in a new way. The scene demonstrates that the future is already present in the seemingly inconsequential acts of human

generosity and compassion, acts in which one looks neither for reward nor profit, but spontaneously reaches out to another human being. In the world's eyes – both then and now – such action is utter folly. It can't be planned on or prepared for. This scene is not set forth as a program for virtues that we can perform in expectation of a reward. The message is that whenever we give up our rights, our time, even our lives – wasting ourselves for others – we enter into that company of fools whose Leader remains hidden among the unimportant ones of this world.

In all the ways that God has been revealed to high human consciousness, there has been one abiding theme: the dignity and value of the human person – and in the Christian revelation every human person is identified with God. The ancient Chinese may have been among the first to formulate it: never do to others what you would not have done to yourself. Archaic Babylonian law commanded that we show good will to others. The mighty Egyptians were told, "Terrorize not a human." Buddha reached enlightenment only when he embarked on a life of compassion for others. And the Jewish faith, parent of both Christianity and Islam, reveals the source of the truth: "Male and female, God created them; in God's own image were they created." For Christians, this revelation of God reached its apex in the incarnation: the Word of God became human flesh to save us. So it is that in St. Matthew's gospel, immediately before the narrative of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection, there is this scene of the last judgement as a metaphor wherein the least human person is identified with the Lord of history.

Is it any wonder the great St. Augustine could exclaim about the Eucharist: "Become what you receive, receive what you are"...it is our destiny and our dignity we share at this table – we who are at the table

become what is on the table and share that with all the world and every human being.

In medieval times those who occupied convents and monasteries were required, as part of their discipline, to undertake periods of total isolation in the wilderness. They would live by themselves for weeks on end completely cut off from any other human contact. And when at the end of their pilgrimage, they returned to their monastery or convent, a ritual exchange took place between the pilgrim and his or her superior. When the pilgrim appeared at the door, the abbot or the abbess would greet them. "Welcome," they would say. "We see you have returned." And the pilgrim would respond with this remarkable little phrase: "Of course I have returned – for whose feet would the hermit wash?"

We don't earn our place  
with God...ever.