

**Homily for November 24, 2002
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 need God's strength for virtue to be second nature to us, as natural as breathing.

Judgment...reward and punishment...to know clearly where we stand before others and God...that's our American idea of justice. We expect it from our law courts. We pay for it big time in attorney fees, and we expect God to agree with us.

What's more, we're not alone in thinking like this – our Jewish ancestors at the time of Jesus thought the same way. Way back then the usual understanding was that one would be rewarded for meritorious works performed on earth. In addition all injustice done to the person would be rectified. We would know – we would have a clear idea of what was right and what was wrong, and when it was done and left undone. Indeed, according to popular thinking then and somewhat today, appropriate records were kept in the “book of life.” In other words, in the Judeo-Christian way of seeing things, there was this abiding conviction that justice was not an illusion, despite what the powers of this world often did to the righteous – despite the Hitlers and the Saddams and the executives at Enron.

But notice what happens in this glorious passage of Matthew chapter 24. This line of expectation that we would know who gets rewarded and punished gets broken. In this gospel, there is no record of virtuous deeds that a person may point to when suing for justice. Both the blessed and the condemned are unaware of

what really matters. Yet this becomes the measure of justice. The lack of awareness, the lack of control through knowledge of what we deserve 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. “Lord, when did we see you hungry...thirsty...when, Lord?”

Such a judgment flies in the face of our usual understanding of justice. Justice is supposed to be something clear-cut. One wants to be assured of standing in the right, even in adversity. That is why this scene is so surprising. Both sides are astonished that the Son of man did not share their notion of justice, their concept of balancing the books.

Furthermore, notice that this scene is really not actually about judgment. Rather, the scene is one of ratification, one of giving the stamp of approval to what already exists. The Son of man does not make the final judgment; he merely confirms the depths of their actions. The hope that human action does have lasting significance is upheld, but in an altogether new way. The scene demonstrates that the future is already present in seemingly inconsequential acts in 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 today – such action is utter folly.

This scene, therefore, is not set forth as a program for virtues that we can perform in expectation of a reward. Rather, the message of this scene 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, the Christ – remains hidden among the unimportant ones of this world. In other words, virtue is not something we necessarily plan, but rather is to be our second nature for those of us who have allowed the Lord to become central in our lives. Virtue becomes our instinctive response when we see someone in trouble or in need. Being non-judgmental is our spontaneous stance in reaching out. Beneath and through it all is the recognition of our common or shared humanity with those in need.

When the Christians of Caesarea, a powerful and wealthy city at the center of world affairs way back in the fourth century, sought advice from their bishop Basil on how they should respond to the needs of the poor, his response lacked any of our present-day nuances. His message was simple and to the point. He wrote: “The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat hanging unused in the closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your home belong to the one who has no shoes; the money you put in your bank belongs to the poor.” There is a timelessness about Saint Basil's words. His tough and uncompromising message applies equally to us as it did to those Christians in that wealthy city 17 centuries ago. His words remind us that giving from our surplus, in other words, from what we don't need for ourselves, is more a question of justice than of charity. Charity is

when we give at cost to ourselves. And this is the challenge of today's gospel. Jesus is setting forth a vision of wasting time spontaneously to such a point that virtue becomes second nature and not a planned exception to our routine. In the words of the anonymous 14th century writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, “By love, God may be caught and held: by thinking, never.”

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