

Christ the King Sunday/Thanksgiving Sunday Psalm 65, Deuteronomy 8:7-18, Matthew 25:31-46, Ephesians 1:15-23

It's Thanksgiving week already... And it's been a tough year for everyone I know. But I keep remembering – how much we still have to be thankful for...

Our lists of particular things to be thankful for, and our methods of giving thanks may differ, person to person. I've learned I do best by starting every morning on my knees thanking God for the sleep I've had and the waking up I'm having... Thanking God for Reah in my life and Rohi in our life... Thanking God most of all for God being God for us – and for all God's people – and for all God's creatures great and small...

As the day proceeds and I take my daily walk I thank God for everyone in our Cataumet and Bourne churches... and our neighbors around us. Our family says 'thank you God' every time we sit down to eat. We thank God for the parsonage home we live in. We thank God for our family and friends, including all of you, who we consider friends and family in Christ...

No matter what's going on, we have much to be thankful for. But most important is – *Who* we need to be saying thanks to... most of all.

The psalms and prophets of Israel name God as king and ruler over all. Now today in Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus also named as king. (As he is named ruler over all in greater detail in our reading from Ephesians...)

But what's been most striking for me as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today, has been St Matthew's picture of the last judgement – where we see Jesus, whom God has given power to rule over all nations – choosing to rule in radical solidarity with the hungry, thirsty, homeless, sick, poorly clad, prisoners and strangers in our communities – calling each of them his family. It's actually rather shocking if we think about it – Jesus, king over all creation, identifying himself with the personal plight of all those who desperately need food, clothing, shelter, welcome and compassionate care. And Jesus identifies so totally and intimately with them that he says '*as you did it to one of these members of my family you did it to me.*' Or – *did not do to me.*

And to those who care for the least of his family Jesus says "*come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...*"

Reminding us of the blessings he speaks in his sermon on the mount (in Matthew 5), saying – “*blessed are the poor in spirit*” – or ‘blessed are those who know their need of God’ – “*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

“*Blessed are those who mourn*” – who lament with those who suffer – “*for they will be comforted.*”

“*Blessed are the meek*” – those of a gentle spirit – “*For they will inherit the earth.*”

And the more we prayerfully linger with all the beatitudes Jesus teaches us in his sermon on the mount, the more we can understand why Jesus identifies with the poor, the sorrowful, and gentle...

And I was almost ready to say ‘the more we study the words of Jesus the more we’ll be ready for this final exam Jesus that describes and posts the answers to here in Matthew 25.’ I was about ready to say ‘since this is an open book exam and we’ve been told the answers, we have no excuse if we don’t pass. And it’s not on me if anyone doesn’t pass, ‘cause I told you how to do it...’

But then I remembered again... the mystery of this story Jesus tells – in which the sheep and goats are equally surprised... to hear Jesus name them as either blessed sheep – or goats who fail the exam. Neither sheep nor goats have made the connection, it seems, between their deeds and how they have responded to Jesus. Or, if they have considered this – the goats have seriously over-estimated their generosity towards those whom Jesus identifies with – while sheep have under-estimated. In other words, none of us see ourselves... as God sees us.

I still believe of course bible study is very important. I hope we all do it. But I also believe the Holy Spirit’s been reminding me (in the words of the apostle James) – faith without works is dead. Study alone without applying what we learn in action doesn’t save us – or help anyone else be saved.

Which has been reminding me of Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who was sometimes accused of being a Matthew 25 fundamentalist. Today’s gospel reading was her main go-to scripture. For the past 87 years Catholic Worker communities have been serving home-cooked meals to the hungry – sharing with anyone who comes to the door. Giving clothing to those in need, offering a place to get warm and dry for those living on the street. Attracting a diverse and interesting cross-section of people... Once, an author working on a book about her came to interview

Dorothy – who was sitting at the lunch table with a woman who was distraught and disheveled and speaking in rambling undecipherable words... Noticing the writer, standing, looking confused, Dorothy asked, “are you here to speak with one of us?” Like Jesus, she identified thoroughly with those she lived among and served...

Our reading today from Matthew 25 inspired much of her work. But Dorothy Day read all the bible, and especially loved the psalms. She also loved books and music and the arts. A favorite saying was a quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky the novelist: “*the world will be saved by beauty.*” She lived mostly in inner city New York, but loved the Catholic Worker’s working farm in upstate New York, where she took time to rest, read, and live surrounded by the beauty of creation...

A bit like Jesus, who identifies especially with the poor and heavily burdened – while serving as Co-creator of creation – author and chief artist with God the Father and the Holy Spirit of all the greatest beauty on earth and in heaven...

So I’m picturing Jesus as the actual behind-the-scenes author of Psalm 65 that we’ve read today. A beautiful psalm that reminds us – ‘all praise and thanks be to God’ – who answers prayer, forgives transgressions, and invites us into the beauty of God’s good creation.... as we hear the psalmist envision God as Cosmic Landscape Gardener – watering, nurturing, blessing the land – with pastures, meadows, hills, flocks and valleys singing praises together to God...and rejoicing with God in the harvest...

No wonder Psalm 65 is one of the church’s assigned readings for Thanksgiving day – along with our reading from Deuteronomy 8 – where God coaches us just before we enter the promised land – to remember all the commandments and lessons of Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. Remember well, God says, and never say to yourselves ‘we have earned the wealth and possessions we have.’ God knows, yes, we’ve worked. But if we have prospered even a little – better be sure to remember – its only by the grace of God that we have been *able* to work – *able* to save – *able* to flourish and give back even a little to God... and the community we live in.

And we always need to remember to give all thanks and praise to God for anything and everything good we have.... Because...there is an ever-present danger – as pastor and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote way back in 1927

saying: “Thanksgiving becomes increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon his most excellent co-workers – ourselves....”

We need to take very seriously God’s word to be very humble and never claim our own power has caused us to prosper and flourish. As, at the most basic level, as bible scholar Walter Brueggemann points out: “A gift kept long enough begins to feel like a possession. A gift kept long enough becomes separated in the memory of the recipient from the giver, so the giver is forgotten.”

Neither Brueggemann nor Niebuhr suggests we should not be thankful for human help. With St Paul, who nearly always gives thanks to God for all the members of all the churches he writes to in his letters...We too thank God often for all of you... and all of our fellow servants of God...

But the point is still – no amount of human help can ever take the place of God’s help. And whenever we forget this we are in very deep trouble.

So as St Augustine said long ago (we): Pray as if everything depends on God. Work as if everything depends on us. Work cannot save us. Only the love of God can save us. But work is always meant to be a means of grace. Any work we do, large or small, paid or unpaid, noticed or unnoticed... is a way to show love for God and neighbor in the smallest details of daily life. Life that Jesus Christ is always meant to be at the center of...

Remembering we ourselves are not the center. We go astray – as even good sheep do. We sin. We all make many mistakes (as the apostle James again says). Part of the bedrock faith of Christians is accepting ourselves and our neighbors as sinners – forgiven sinners – who live with other forgiven sinners.

So if we believe anything – let’s believe passionately – all the words of The Lord’s Prayer – the prayer Jesus taught us – the prayer we pray (I hope) every day...

For if we believe what we pray – *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...* We can be deeply thankful, every day, always. As we keep thanking God for every blessing – most of all Jesus. Who loves us and longs to fill us with the same power and love that raised him up from the dead into life forever... the life on earth and in heaven he invites us to join him in... Now and forever.

Amen.