

## ***Mission as Our Witness***

Matthew 25:31-46,  
Mission Sunday  
September 30, 2007

### **I.**

Today is Mission Sunday. It's a time when we think about our call as Christians to witness to the Gospel, and to reach out and help others in need. And those needs exist not only out there in the community, but also right here in St. Thomas.

Look around as you sit here in church and see some of our brothers and sisters who would welcome support, or comfort, or care. Look to your left and right as you drive down some of our nearby roads and see not only the poverty that always has been there, but also the devastation that still remains from Hurricane Katrina two years later. Think about the people we encounter every day, whether on the golf course or the shopping centers, who do not know our Lord Jesus Christ. The mission field is everywhere. No place is exempt.

In keeping with our theme today you have a booklet in your service bulletin that describes the missions and ministries currently underway at St. Thomas. It also lists some ideas for starting new programs. When you go into Johnson Hall today, you will see displays for these activities, with opportunities to sign-up and help. People will be there to answer questions you might have. And I pray that we all give serious thought to how we can extend ourselves to others.

### **II.**

Today's Gospel speaks to mission and ministry. And I should begin by mentioning that this story of the sheep and the goats is difficult for some people because they believe that the idea of God's judgment seems a little harsh. They would much rather focus on God's love.

And, of course, God's love is central to our faith. It is an essential teaching of Christianity. Certainly God's love is a gift beyond a measure. But there is more, and we all know what it is. We also know that the day will come when each of us must account for the content of our lives.

That's what this Gospel reading is about. It tells of Jesus' second coming, which we anticipate in our worship at the beginning of Advent, and it describes some of the criteria that our risen Lord will use when the time of judgment comes.

Let's look at these criteria, these standards, for a minute. Sometimes we tend to associate God's judgment with bad behavior, or immoral, unethical, or even criminal conduct. Well, I'm sure those things will be part of the picture. But that's not the lesson of today's Gospel. Today's lesson is something different. It's a story of mission and ministry.

What will be the difference between the sheep and the goats? What will be the ticket out of the goat pen into the sheep pen? Jesus explained by referring to himself. He began by expressing how people cared for him when he was in need, or how they did not care for his needs. He spoke of when people fed him, and clothed him, and took care of him when he was sick. And he also spoke of when people did not do that.

At first this was confusing because people took him literally. As he began his discourse people thought back about whether or not they actually had cared for Jesus himself. But that is not what he meant. Christ identified so closely with the people that their suffering was his suffering. This is why he said that when people cared for the least of humanity they cared for him, and when they rejected the least of humanity they rejected him. And the reading tells us that the choice they made determined whether they were on Jesus' right, or his left.

This means that our response to the least of humanity today also is our response to Jesus. Some people will see the needy as brothers and sisters in Christ, and will reach out to them. Others will think only of themselves, and will remain apart from those with whom they would prefer not to associate.

### III.

But this lesson does not end there. There is more to it. And it raises some unspoken questions about how we understand our faith. Today's Gospel from Matthew, if we look no further, might leave the impression that our future in eternity depends only upon whether or not we care for the needy. But what about belief in Jesus Christ? What about faith as a basis for salvation? What about Christ and the cross?

Matthew did not intend to diminish either faith or the cross. On at least nine different occasions he described how Jesus associated faith with his miracles. Matthew also recorded how the angel of the Lord, in appearing to Joseph, said that Mary's son would save people from their sins (1:21). And Matthew also is the source of Jesus' words, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (11:28-29).

So, what's going on in the reading we heard today? What does it mean? As you might imagine, theologians and scholars have reached different interpretations. In my view Jesus was not speaking only to the actual people who heard his voice, but also was speaking to the church he knew he would leave behind. He was not changing the criteria for our salvation as individuals, but rather was describing how we as individuals must collectively carry out the mission of the church. We are called to faith, and the church is called to mission, and the two work together.

This is evident from the catechism of our church at page 855 of the Book of Common Prayer. It says that "the Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members." That's us; people here in church today. But because we already are saved through our faith, what more do we gain by our works and caring for others in need? Do works make any difference?

The answer is in today's Gospel and a lot of other places throughout the Bible. Our faith will get us into heaven, but what happens to us after we get there will have a lot to do with how we treat others now. The implications of this are significant. We all will not be doing the same thing in heaven. And we're not just going to be sitting around on clouds playing harps.

The Bible is clear that there are heavenly rewards for our earthly works. And it is equally clear that these rewards are for people who already are believers. Thus, there is a distinction between salvation in the first instance, and rewards that come later. Salvation is a free gift for believers, but rewards are earned by our works after we are saved. And our works include how we respond to the call to mission.

Let me give a contemporary example. Assume, for a moment, that the Super Dome in New Orleans is heaven. And I know some people really believe that. But, for purposes of my example, if the Super Dome is heaven, then your faith is the ticket that gets you inside. You're a believer, and at the end of your life you're in. No one can take that away from you. However, there still is the question of where you will sit. Will you be in the last row of the upper deck behind the goal posts, or will you be in the owner's box on the fifty yard line, or will you be somewhere in between?

That question will be answered by the rewards you will receive in heaven, and I said earlier that this idea of rewards is biblical. Let me give a few examples. In Matthew we learn that "the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done" (16:27). Romans says that God "will give to each person according to what he has done" (2:6). In 2 Corinthians we are told that "we must all

appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (5:10). And in Revelation the risen Lord said, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done" (22:12). There are other examples.

So we see that while believers are assured admission to the kingdom, life in the kingdom will not be the same experience for everyone. And while the details of our heavenly existence remain a mystery, we can believe that these biblical rewards will determine how we are to experience the joy of God's eternal presence.

And at this point I should be clear on something. I do not believe that there will be a caste system in heaven. There will be no sense of superiority or inferiority. We will not be competitive or jealous. We will have no regrets and no pride. A person in the upper deck will be loved by God as much as a person sitting on the fifty yard line.

#### **IV.**

But the question remains. Even though we know we will be in the Super Dome, so to speak, are we happy now with where we think our seats will be? Have we done enough? Have we answered the call to mission as God wants us to do? Christ left the church behind as his body. Have we helped the church to become more like sheep, or to become more like goats?

Today's reading teaches us that when we stand before our risen Lord on that inevitable day, we will not be asked how well we worshipped in church, but rather how that worship transformed us into people who were serious about the church's mission. We not only will be called to account for who we are as Christians, but also what we have done as Christians. The present reality of our faith will answer the first question. But the answer to the second still is being written.

#### **V.**

So, if today's reading applies to the church today, it does so because Jesus knew that he would be present in the church throughout the ages. And he meant us to understand that when we reach out to others we touch him as well.

I always have cherished the words of St. Theresa of Avila, a sixteenth century nun known for her contemplative writings of Christ. Her words speak to us of our call to mission, and they recognize that even though Christ is here in the church, it is up to us to take him into the world in the name of the church. She said:

Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours. *Amen.*