

The Festival of Christ the King
November 22-23, 2008
Matthew 25:31-46

“Until Jesus Comes Again” – Part 4 in 4-part Sermon Series on Christian Stewardship

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come: our risen, reigning, and returning Lord Jesus Christ, our Shepherd King who will be revealed on the last day in great power and glory and will judge the world in righteousness. Today’s Gospel lesson gives a clear picture of that final judgment. For the child of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus, this picture of Christ’s return and the final judgment are not intended to make us fearful and afraid, but to comfort and reassure us until Jesus comes again. For the child of God, this picture is intended to renew our faith and hope, strengthening us in our calling as stewards, managing faithfully all of God’s gifts until Jesus comes again. That is the theme for the message this day: “Until Jesus Comes Again.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, and the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a very important one because here Jesus tells us what is yet to happen. It is the fulfillment of what he came on earth to do. And what a difference this second coming of Jesus will be from his first! At his first coming, in humiliation the second Person of the Triune God was a tiny baby lying in a manger, and at the end of his life was nailed to the cross. Keep in mind this is the last image the world has of the Lord Jesus: in great anguish and suffering, hanging from the cross. His resurrection and ascension were revealed only to his chosen followers, and not to the world. So, when Jesus shall come again, what a different Jesus the world will see: “... **in his glory, and all the angels with him, [seated] on the throne of his glory**” (Matt. 25:31). And every eye shall see him because every eye from all the nations will be gathered before him. The whole human race, all generations from throughout the ages, all standing before the Son of Man. Such a vision staggers the imagination!

With all the nations gathered before him, a division will then take place through the holy angels. As a shepherd who has a mixed flock divides sheep from goats at the end of the day, so Christ our Shepherd King will like a shepherd separate the sheep from the goats. This division constitutes a judgment and a verdict; what follows is only the justification for that verdict. The sheep are those who have the works which reveal the evidence of faith, while the goats are those who have no such works because they have no faith in this Shepherd King. God’s people may ask, “If my sins have already been judged when Christ gave his life for my sins upon the cross, why is there a judgment – and that judgment is based on works?” Observe that there are two judgments: a *secret* one at death, when God accepts the faith which embraces Jesus Christ and his saving work. There is also a *public* judgment before all people and nations on the last day. That is what is before us in today’s Gospel lesson, and at this public judgment the evidence of faith – that is, the good works that have been done in faith for Jesus’ sake, are made known. But as believers, aren’t we supposed to be exempt from judgment? Note that while the sheep are present before the judgment seat of Christ, not a single sin of any one of them is mentioned; only their good works done in faith for Jesus’ sake are named before the universe. My friends, let us not misinterpret or misunderstand this as works righteousness. The inner motive behind the works named by Christ and done by his sheep is love – love for the King, a love that springs from faith in the King. Note that the works are not grand and glorious, but humble and lowly: feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked and welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and imprisoned. These works are the fruit, not the root, of faith. So, the sheep are not brought into judgment, and yet are judged. But the sins of the goats, the unbelievers, are brought forth before the universe and their verdict of condemnation is pronounced: “**You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels**” (Matt. 25:41).

Until Jesus comes again, what then should we be doing? Above all, we are to hold fast in faith to our Shepherd King in this life. He does not promise that life for us, his sheep, will always be sweet and easy. Many of you know by personal experience that it can be quite the opposite; that we can be sorely tested because of our faith. Through it all, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us our calling is to cling firmly in faith to our Shepherd King who gave his life for us. That Shepherd King comes to us this day in his Word, the Scriptures, and in his very Body and Blood in the Sacrament to strengthen us, assuring us of his grace and mercy. Until Jesus comes again, we will be tempted to focus on self, rather than the needs of others. That is especially true now with the economic problems facing our nation. The temptation is to circle the wagons, close the ranks, and focus inward on ourselves; that would be a mistake. If ever there were a time when a bold response of faith is needed, that time is now! The lesson to be learned is that God always provides for his people, no matter what. So whether we are enjoying prosperous times or hard times, God will provide. Remember our definition of Christian stewardship: ***Christian stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God, and of God's family, the church, in managing all of life and life's resources for God's purposes.*** I would add to that "until Jesus comes again." Until Jesus comes again, our Shepherd King calls us to look for his face in the face of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and imprisoned, and serve them as we would serve Jesus himself.

May God help us to do this, for Jesus' sake, until Jesus comes again. Amen. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, Shepherd King, Amen.