

**“Lord, When Did We See You ...?”**

In the name of him who is coming soon to judge the living and the dead, dear friends in Christ. Well here we are: we've come to the end of another church year. Let this be proof positive to those who say I never get around to finishing anything I start that they're wrong. The truth is, of course, that I manage to finish at least one sermon every week. I really do; it only seems like they go on forever. But sooner or later (okay, usually *later*) we reach the final “Amen”. And that's what this Sunday is all about: *The Final Amen*. It reminds us that we are steadily and inexorably drawing by the minute to that Day appointed by the Lord when this world and everything in it will come to an end. The date has been set. We just don't know when it will be; but as sure as God's Word is true, one day we *will* reach it. And after that nothing will ever be the same again.

It may interest you to know that the hymn *Joy to the World*, which we usually think of as a Christmas carol, was actually written with this Sunday in mind. That's why it lacks the standard references to Bethlehem, shepherds, and a baby laid in a manger. It speaks instead of Jesus coming as a King to establish his reign over all people. It tells of his coming to eliminate – to wipe out every trace of – sin and its curse. That's what we're looking forward to: Jesus Christ coming in glory as our King. Indeed, in some circles this day that we celebrate as the Sunday of Fulfillment is known as the Sunday of Christ the King.

And certainly, we see this theme reflected in today's readings. In the Old Testament lesson, we hear how the Lord promises to send his new David to his people to be a shepherd to them. He's not going to be like their earthly shepherds who fell down on the job. He's coming instead to gather those who have been scattered, and to judge between the weak sheep and the strong ones who have been oppressing their less sturdy fellows by butting them away from the food trough with their horns and muddying their water supply with their feet. He's coming to set things right. And we understand that this new David that the Lord promises is, like his illustrious ancestor, a King.

Again, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus calls himself the King, a King who is coming in glory – once again to gather together all people before him; and to divide them like a shepherd, the sheep from the goats. And we are looking forward to that day when all things are fulfilled, when Christ our King comes in his glory and we see him in the flesh. We're looking forward to it because we know it will be the end of all oppression, sin, and sadness. After that day we will have nothing but good to look forward to.

But interestingly enough, though the Gospel text is about the end, in it Jesus says very little about what will be afterward. He doesn't talk at all about the glories and wonders to come. Instead he looks back at what was: not his reign of glory in the great beyond; but his reign right here and now, his present reign as the King of the Church, his reign that is as yet hidden under the cross.

And that's something we can really appreciate about our Lutheran theology: we understand that Christ is reigning now in his Church. Our protestant and evangelical friends see things quite a bit differently. In their minds, Jesus is seated in glory at God's

right hand far, far removed from all the goings on here below. He is an essentially absent King. And so, in order to deal with biblical texts that speak of Christ's reign on earth before the time of the end they are forced to come up with weird millennial theories about an imagined future reign of Christ on this still fallen earth. For them it's sort of heavenly half way house: better than the present age because Christ will be ruling from his equivalent of the oval office in Jerusalem; but vastly inferior to his glorious reign from his heavenly throne room.

Against this sort of thinking and strained theology we insist with the Scriptures that no, the reign of Christ is happening now, right here among us. Here his voice is heard in the Word as it is being read. Here Jesus speaks in the Words of absolution and all throughout the liturgy. And here too he is seen sacramentally. Christ the King who is heard in the Word makes himself felt in the water of Baptism. He makes himself seen, touched, tasted, and smelled in the Sacrament of the Altar. In these ways he's saying to us, "I'm not way up in the sky sitting on my hands just waiting for my chance to come back. I'm here now. Yes, my presence is hidden in humility; but I am here now to serve you, and to apply to you the blessings of my lifting up on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world." And like I said before, we are especially blessed to see the Lord Jesus in these places and ways because it's a fairly unique though thoroughly biblical perspective.

Where we're less likely to see Jesus, however, is in another place he said he would be. It's a place that we don't usually care to look. I mentioned earlier that we are awaiting Christ's coming in the flesh; but in today's Gospel he's telling us, "I'm already here in the walking, talking, warm-blooded, living flesh. And you can see me if you care to, if only you will open your eyes."

This is what Jesus says to the righteous, to the sheep gathered at his right hand: "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was without clothing," and so on, "and you tended to me in my needs." And hearing this, the righteous are dumbfounded. They ask, "Lord, when did we see you in any of those ways? Jesus answers them, "When you did [these things] for the least of these by brothers, you did them for me." Now that is just profound: Jesus, the King of all Creation and Lord of glory, locates himself now specifically in human weakness, suffering, and need. That's where we can see him.

You know, the Scripture speaks of those who have entertained angels unaware. Here we discover that it's not just angels that we're dealing with; but the Lord himself. To be precise, where there is someone who is without the basic necessities of life, where there is loneliness, alienation, despair, injustice, or misery of any description, there is Jesus in the middle of it. And that really shouldn't be a surprise to us, for it is he who bears all our sorrows and pains. He isn't up there in the sky untouched by the world's misery; he's right here in the thick of it. He himself is bearing it, though it's worth noting that he identifies himself particularly in the suffering of the faithful. He says that he is seen in "the least of these my brothers." And it's only natural that Christ suffers in and with those who trust in him for they are members of his own body. And when a member of the body hurts, the whole body suffers. As a matter of biological fact, it's specifically in the head that the pain is registered. And Christ is the head of all who are one body in him.

Interestingly enough, since Jesus is seen specifically in the afflictions and needs of his people, it's also safe to say that he is seen again when one of the faithful responds and brings a remedy to the problem. That is to say, when one member of the body of Christ is motivated by love to serve another, they both see the Lord: one in the suffering of the other, and one in the act of mercy that alleviates that suffering. Then it's like the hands of the Body of Christ washing and treating a wound on the foot, or wiping something out of the eye. It's Christ our Lord taking care of his own by his own.

This really should change the way we look at people and their needs – particularly our fellow Christians. Instead of thinking, “Oh no, not more problems to deal with! I'm sick to death of having to help out all the time”, it should be, “Oh look, another opportunity to serve Jesus.” I mean, think about it: if you saw Jesus in desperate need and you knew it was him, wouldn't you want to do something about it? Jesus says that *is* the case: “You *are* looking at me and I'm telling you in no uncertain terms who I am. You can't pretend you don't recognize me.”

And though I said we want to apply this particularly to the faithful, we have to be careful. You and I can't see someone else's faith, nor do we know who might be made open to hearing the Gospel precisely through an act of kindness or mercy on our part. So, if we're going to make a mistake, let's err on the side of love. Christ gave his life also even for those who will ultimately reject him and be lost forever. And since we don't know, let's not make ourselves the judge. Let's gladly attend the needs of all who are genuinely afflicted.

And let's consider *all* their needs. It's possible that we might think of this aid we're to render merely in physical terms. That won't do. Human beings were created as a union of body and spirit. And we have needs of both body and soul. In fact, if we were to prioritize, the spiritual concerns are unquestionably the most pressing since they are the ones upon which a person's eternal destiny depends; but both are important. We can't afford to neglect either one.

But with respect to spiritual needs, the things Jesus speaks of are precisely what it is that the Church does for those who belong to her. To those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the Church satisfies them with the righteousness of Christ. To those who were strangers from God and aliens, those who were far away, they are brought near and made the people of God – they are made his own sons and daughters, part of his royal family, and heirs of his salvation. To those who are spiritually naked and ashamed of their exposed sins, the Church clothes them with Christ in Baptism, and unites them with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection, and then raises them up in new life wrapped in his perfection. And to those who are sick with sin or imprisoned by guilt and legalism, they are visited, comforted, healed, and set free by his word of forgiveness. The Church is not a country club for those who are rich and well in spiritual matters; it's a hospital for the sick and a rescue agency for the destitute. And when we share the Gospel of Jesus Christ and bring others who are needy here to his Church, and when we support the work of the Church, we are very much a part of feeding the starving, clothing the naked, and tending the needs of the sick and imprisoned.

And again, I hasten to add that with respect to physical and spiritual needs it's not one or the other, but both. We need to deal with the whole person, for in so doing we are dealing with the whole Christ who is body and Spirit in and with that person. We need to train ourselves to see him that way: reigning now as King in this fallen world in

humility and suffering – just as he did from the cross. Instead of turning away from the suffering of those around us when we see it, we need to train ourselves to ask, “Don’t you know who that is? That’s Jesus. That’s my King. How can I serve him?”

May our gracious Father in heaven open our eyes to see Jesus our King and his reign over us now in humility, and may he motivate us by his Spirit to gladly serve him even as he served us, seeking his forgiveness and his assurance when we fail, so that trusting in his mercy and fulfilling his will when the last day comes we too we may stand with those at his right hand and hear his gracious invitation, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***