

CHRIST MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON—Rev. Dr. Paula Winsor Sage

November 26, 2017

CHRIST THE KING (25th AFTER PENTECOST)

MATTHEW 25:31-46

PRAYER: Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, who are our strength and redeemer. AMEN

I don't know whether or not you have noticed, but our neighbors across the street have recently acquired a new sign. One thing they have been using the sign for is to announce the title of the sermon for the week. This idea of giving sermons titles has been around for a long time, but it is more common in Protestant Churches than Catholic or Episcopal. I haven't ever given much thought to titles for my sermons, but that sign across the street has got me thinking. If I were going to title this week's sermon I would call it "Surprised by God". Not, "SURPRISED, By God!", but "Surprised by GOD" (Just so we are clear.)

We will get to the surprises. First I want to say a word about today's feast day-- which all the readings reflect. It is the Feast of Christ the King. Each year the readings follow a cycle. The cycle begins with Advent, which starts next week. .

Advent begins with the anticipation of the birth of Jesus and then the seasons of the church year follow his life and ministry in rough chronology. From Pentecost until now, the Gospels present his teachings. But this Sunday, the last before Advent begins, is kind of a glorification of his ministry. We call this last Sunday of the Church Year "Christ the King". We are familiar with Christ as King. He was mocked and crowned as king as he was crucified. He is called king in many hymns and in scripture. So today is different from all the other Gospels we have had. All the other Gospels have been reporting history, events and teachings from Jesus' life which are pertinent for today but which have already happened or which are parables-- invented stories. As we are surprised by God today, the first surprise is that we are hearing about something real that hasn't happened yet-- Jesus' second coming. We are hearing prophecy; we are celebrating the future--a one-of-a-kind event.

This last message Jesus has for his disciples before the Last Supper is a direct statement of a future event. Jesus begins Chapter 25 of Matthew with the

statement, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." He follows this with two made-up stories starting with "as if", to illustrate his main teaching point.

These are the chosen Gospels of the past 2 weeks, about the bridesmaids and their lamps and the man who went away and entrusted his talents to his servants.

Both speak of judgment. But they are made-up.

Today's Gospel is a prophecy, a proclamation by Jesus himself, not a made-up story: Jesus says not "as if", but rather, "WHEN the Son of Man comes in all his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him." And here is the second surprise. Jesus doesn't say all who are baptized, or all who follow Him, or all the people of Israel will be gathered; he says ALL THE NATIONS of the world. You may not have noticed, but this doesn't happen elsewhere in scripture either. He spends most of his time speaking to his own cultural group.

Jesus then tells us that he will separate the people as if “sheep” from “goats”; and some will be at his right hand and some at the left. The message here is clear: some will go to heaven and some not.

By now we are getting the idea of judgment day that we have heard of elsewhere in scripture. Next, Jesus blesses the group on his right (sheep) and condemns the group on the left (goats) to eternal fire. But the surprises continue. Both of these groups of people are themselves surprised when they hear Jesus’ reasons for his treatment of the two groups. And this should surprise us as well. Jesus mentions those who were: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, sharing clothing, caring for the sick, and visiting prisons. But what he says is that they were actually feeding him and giving him drink, etc. The blessed group are surprised as they don’t recall ever seeing Jesus among those they helped. They don’t understand the same thing we have trouble understanding, that Jesus is present in the poor and downtrodden and sick and needy. Jesus blesses those who ministered to him in these forgotten people. Then He

condemns the group on the left, who failed to feed and clothe and welcome--and are equally surprised because they never saw Jesus in the people they failed to help either! The idea is that, had they Jesus, they would have done something; instead they only saw "those people" who don't matter.

There are parts of this Gospel that surprise us as much as they surprise the participants. In our surprise, Jesus is telling us that, throughout our lives, He will show up and surprise us at unexpected times and places--and he tells us how and where and under what circumstances he will be there. He is pushing us to recognize the presence of God in others who are in need. He is also showing us very clearly how important it is for us to care directly for them.

And, the last of the surprises by God in this Gospel is perhaps the biggest one-- the surprise of what is not present in this picture of Judgment Day. If I asked you what you have learned as a Christian about preparing for the Kingdom of Heaven, what would you say about the requirements? Is it a surprise to you not to find obeying the 10 commandments, believing in the creed statements, confessing

sins and forgiveness, being baptized in this picture of judgment? I don't think these things which are part of our worship each week are irrelevant to our entering the kingdom, but Jesus does not mention them here and that is a big surprise.

It illustrates very clearly how important it is to Jesus that we love others as He loved us and that we take time to go and care directly for those from all nations who are in need. Of all the possible criteria for judgment, this is the only one mentioned in this Gospel, his last message.

I found a wonderful quote from a one-time pastor of the Riverside Church in NYC (James Forbe), "nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the POOR". For Jesus, in this picture of his return as King --and judge--the only requirement He gives to us for admission to Heaven is to get out there and care for those among us who are in need. There, he says, and only there, will you meet me.

Have no doubt that this Gospel is about you and me--and everyone else in the world as well--practicing Christians or not! Advent is calling us to shift our priorities, to look for Jesus in our daily lives, and to reach out to others, person to person. In this way we will really open ourselves to be surprised by God! AMEN