

PENTECOST: A TIME TO BE FILLED WITH GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT

Last Sunday after Pentecost

Christ the King

November 20, 2011

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100 or 95:1-7a

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Judgment Day

This week's Gospel text from Matthew concludes the apocalyptic/judgment discourse (Matthew 23:1 – 25:46) and Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of heaven. However, unlike the two preceding parables in chapter 25, which begin in formulaic fashion ("The kingdom of heaven is like ..."), here we are confronted with a depiction of the *parousia* – Jesus' second coming. Up to this point we have been given warnings to watch, and to be prepared, and to live responsibly. But now we hear, "When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him ..." (25:31a, *GNT*), words that hearken back to the previous chapter when Jesus describes the Son of Man "coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (24:30, *GNT*).

Judgment Day -- the scene described is indeed dramatic and climactic, with the king, acting as judge, separating the righteous from the unrighteous. Judgment of the nations is meted out, but not according to the criteria we might expect. There is no mention of grace, justification, or faith. Rather, acts of mercy and the ways in which the nations of the world treated the "least important" followers of Jesus determine who are sheep and who are goats. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, welcoming the stranger – such signs of hospitality are what define a life lived in response to the Gospel's message.

The Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel metaphorically describes God's people as sheep. Our God says, "You, my sheep, the flock that I feed, are my people, and I am your God" (34:31, *GNT*). Inasmuch as the sheep have been mistreated by false shepherds – leaders charged with the responsibility of caring for the people but who, instead, abused their power for their own gain (34:1-10) -- God assumes the role as shepherd who will look after the sheep -- seeking the lost, feeding them, caring for those who are hurt, healing the sick, and providing for the sheep a place of safety and rest. God, as the true shepherd, demonstrates the ways in which people of faith are to live and treat the "least important" among us.

In our day-to-day comings and goings, are we cognizant of encountering the living Christ when we come upon the "least important" in our midst? In the eyes of our loving Lord, the "least important" are none other than Christ himself. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians acknowledges that the church is Christ's body, "the completion of him" (1:23, *GNT*). As members of the body of Christ, how are we proclaiming Christ's message of love and mercy to the "least important" in our communities? How are we living out our faith? Are we like sheep, or like goats? How will our lived response to the Gospel be judged?

The living Christ came as a humble servant; he suffered, died, rose, and ascended into heaven where he is seated at God's "right side in the heavenly world" and "rules there above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords" (Ephesians 1:20b, 21a, *GNT*). Our King will come again in glory to unite us all under his gentle rule as we hear him say to his sheep, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world" (Matthew 25:34, *GNT*).

On this Christ the King Sunday, how shall we worship our Shepherd King?

This week's Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who served on the staff of American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship until retirement. Barbara continues as a consultant to ABS.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Cambodia – with thanks to God for Bible work in this region; and with prayers that all projects will run smoothly and on schedule; that God will guide the Society in selecting other partners – local Christian NGOs and churches – through whom Scriptures may be distributed all over the country; and for God's wisdom in the search for a General Secretary to lead the Bible Society, so that the right person will be chosen for this position; **Laos** – with thanks to God that the revision of the Lao Bible was completed last year, after eight years of work; and with prayers for Laos Partnership as the Society helps the Laos Evangelical Church to establish a distribution center in Vientiane, and as the Society seeks opportunities to set up a mobile distribution unit despite government restrictions, particularly outside the capital city; **Vietnam** – with thanks to God for the exciting work being done in the Society; for the publication of the Vietnamese-Chinese New Testament; for the continued expansion of the partnerships with the official church and house churches; and for the newly published Vietnamese Bible - an important resource this year, as the church celebrates 100 years of Protestantism; and with prayers that this new Bible brings a new dynamism to the Church; also pray for the four minority-language translation projects.

Activity Corner: "Sheep" Hands

Supplies needed: Bible; construction paper; scissors; markers; glue or paste; cotton balls.

Invite everyone in your household to trace their hands 7 times with their fingers and thumb spread out as far as possible. After cutting out the hands, turn them upside down to represent sheep and draw "faces" on the thumbs. The fingers will be the "legs." Cover the remainder of the hands with cotton. On the back of each sheep, ask everyone to write an act of kindness they will do each day throughout the week. (It will probably be best to do this before gluing on the cotton balls.) Encourage everyone to keep their "sheep" hands as a reminder that, as Christ's body on earth, each of us are Christ's hands and that we are called to serve the "least important" among us.

The lessons for Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year, point to the living Christ who rules over all things. Read Psalm 95:1-7a during family devotional time throughout

the week. Each day of the week focus on one of the verses and discuss the ways in which each verse speaks to your household. At the end of each day's reading, invite everyone to respond together, "JESUS IS OUR LORD AND KING." Conclude by singing together a hymn about Jesus as Lord and King such as "He Is Lord," "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," "O Jesus, King Most Wonderful," or one of your favorite hymns.