

LAST SUNDAY IN THE CHURCH YEAR

“The Return of Christ”

Matthew 25:31-46

It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. If that's true, then the thousands of words in the New Testament are really just pictures of Christ. And each picture shows us a different perspective of His person and work. For instance, the picture of the baby Jesus, born of the virgin Mary in the backwater town of Bethlehem, shows us the humility of Christ – that even though He was and is God, he emptied himself and became a human being for us. The picture of Jesus with the little children shows us his great compassion and love for all people, even the little ones. The picture of him agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane over his coming suffering and death shows us the depth of this world's sinful predicament. The picture of Christ on the cross shows us how far God will go to save sinners and the picture of the risen Christ standing before the tomb on Easter morning shows us the victory that he gained for us all. But perhaps the most powerful and poignant picture in the entire New Testament is the picture the words of our text for today paint for us – the picture of Jesus the Judge of all.

Today is the last Sunday in the church year. It marks the end of another year of God's grace for us within the Church. But it also dramatically sums up the year with the news that the real hope of the Kingdom will be fulfilled in the return of Jesus as Judge.

What was begun with his life, death and resurrection so many years ago will be brought to a dramatic conclusion with his return. And make no mistake about it, he will return! We have his word on it. And when he returns that which is now a matter of faith will become evident to one and all. For when he returns he will not come as a baby in a backwater town in a small corner of the world. He will come as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and the Judge of all. We confess this in our creeds.

The Bible tells us that no one knows when Christ will come again. In fact, Jesus himself says that not even the Son knows, only the Father. Despite the efforts of some to pinpoint that date, the fact remains that no one has or ever will know when Christ will return until he indeed comes again. But, by faith, we know he will come again.

The Bible also tells us that the signs of its nearness have all been fulfilled. And while we 21st century Christians are obviously closer to Christ's return than were those early Christians simply by virtue of the passage of some 2,000 years, the signs of his return have always been abundantly clear to each succeeding generation and have served to remind each believer that the time is close at hand. Because no one knows when Christ will return and because the signs of that return have all been fulfilled since the ascension of Christ, believers of every generation have been called upon to be in constant readiness. Like the story of the ten virgins of two weeks ago, there will be no time to prepare when the bridegroom comes. There will be no second chance. Those who are ready will go in

and the door will be shut. Therefore, Jesus reminds us, the time to ready ourselves is now, not tomorrow or next week or next year.

The Bible also makes it clear that to believers, Christ's return brings hope because it means the final and full realization of our salvation. For what has been promised in this life will be fulfilled in his return. It will be, in the very poignant imagery of Holy Scripture, like a wedding day as the bridegroom Christ comes and takes his bride, the Church, to live with him forever in his home, in heaven. Rather than causing fear and anxiety, as the phrase "judgment day" often does for unbelievers, the return of Christ moves believers to look forward to the future with great joy and anticipation – much like a little child looks forward to Christmas.

According to our text, when Christ returns he will gather all people before him just as a shepherd gathers his sheep and he will separate those who are his from all others just as a shepherd separates his sheep from the goats. This separation, the Bible assures us, is based on faith – on what people did and didn't do because of faith. Remember, James said, "faith without works is dead." So too, a living faith in Jesus produces works of faith – works, Jesus says, like feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the destitute, visiting the sick and the imprisoned – all acts of mercy and love to others in response to God's mercy and love to us in Christ.

There is no double standard – as if some are saved by works and others by faith. For while we affirm that a man is justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we also affirm that this faith is an active not a passive thing. The Christian faith never has been and never will be simply a matter of the intellect by which one simply subscribes to a set of propositions or doctrines and is saved. Rather, faith is a matter of the whole person – mind, body and soul – a faith that moves people to action not inaction – action that is directed toward loving God and ones fellowman with ones whole heart and soul and mind. Faith responds in worship, prayer, study of God's word, fellowship – all actions. But it doesn't stop there. It also responds in service to others – in helping to meet the spiritual and material needs of others as well. Those two things are so intertwined in the life and teaching of Jesus himself that he says that when one of his followers ministers to the least of their brethren, they're actually ministering to Christ himself.

This last Sunday in the church year always provides an opportunity for God's people to reflect and evaluate. Fifty-two weeks ago the church year began with the call to prepare our hearts and homes to celebrate the first coming of Christ. Today, we're called upon to prepare our hearts and homes once again, not for his first coming but for his last. Are we better prepared today that we were a year ago for that return? Have we grown in our relationship with him throughout the year now past? And are we growing in carrying out our faith active in love day to day as we look forward to his return?

Dear friends, the Bible reminds us that the time is short and that the Lord's return will not be delayed forever. Indeed we are closer to that return today than we were just a week ago. May God bless us as we look forward to that for Jesus' sake. Amen.