

Sermon for November 23, 2014 (Christ the King, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24; Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46

Know what: Jesus is the good shepherd, karma is a lie

So what: rejoice in God's care, share it with others

Now what: Live a generous life, because God is generous with us

Title: Karma is a Lie

Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep" (Ezekiel 34:20).

In March of the year 1556, Thomas Cranmer was burned at the stake. Just a few years earlier, he was serving as the Archbishop of Canterbury – the most senior church leader in England and a close adviser to King Edward VI.

By all accounts, Cranmer was a good man. Not overly ambitious, honestly devout and spiritually minded, with personal integrity.

But Edward died suddenly at only 15 years of age. Not long after his half-sister, Mary Tudor (bloody Mary!), ascended to the throne. Mary's goal was to return the kingdom to papal obedience.

In order to make this happen, she authorized a bloody and brutal campaign. Any prominent person who had clear Protestant sympathies was burned at the stake. The great Thomas Cranmer was burnt just outside of Oxford for the crime of heresy.

What is it that people fight about when they fight about religion?
Is it not ALWAYS a fight over the proper definition of orthodoxy?
Over whose IDEAS are better than the others?

In our recent study of the Legacy of St. Francis, Richard Rohr astutely noted that there is not a single record in the history of the world of anyone being burned at the stake for failing to clothe the naked or feed the hungry!

It's true! In every place, in every religion, people judge between themselves on the basis of their ideas.

But is this how God judges humanity? Is this how God evaluates your life – by testing and weighing your orthodoxy?

My friends, in today's appointed readings, we are allowed to see the truth that God evaluates humanity in a very, very different way.

TODAY, we arrive at this famous and much-loved parable at the end of Matthew's Gospel. This is the last teaching from the Lord Jesus before the story of his Passion begins.

Now, this parable may be familiar and beloved, but that doesn't mean that it is easily understood!

In fact, there is a vibrant debate among scholars about how to interpret it.

The crucial questions are these:

1. Who are "all the nations" being judged by the Son of Man?
2. And who are "the least of these" who seem to be in need of care?

It's not as obvious as it may seem at first.

In New Testament Greek, "panta ta ethne" – translated here as "all the nations" – typically refers to the Gentiles – to the non-Israelite tribes and cities and nations.

If that is the original intention, then "the least of these" most likely are disciples of Jesus who have gone out to spread the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

After all, THIS is the task of disciples following the Lord's resurrection, as we hear it explained in the Great Commission at the very end of Matthew: to go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations – of "panta ta ethne" (Matthew 28:19).

This approach to the parable then places us – as the church – in the position of the ones who come in need of hospitality. We come in weakness and need, with our hands open, hoping for help and assistance from the world around us.

This seems to be the original intent of the parable – what it meant to the original community of disciples who told this story and wrote it down.

But **WE** read it today because of what it tells us about Christ as the King, as the One who judges the living and the dead.

How does God judge humanity?

What is God looking for in the lives of human beings?

Not ORTHODOXY, but ORTHOPRAXY. Not “right thinking”, but “right acting”.

It seems that God is not quite as concerned about the IDEAS that we have in our minds so much as the ways in which we provide care for others in need. *****

Last week, I heard of some friends who are planning to travel to South Africa over the Christmas holiday.

It sounds lovely, doesn't it? Of course, I would love to go on a trip to South Africa, which is a beautiful country.

But do you know how much it costs for a family to make this kind of trip?

\$6000 ? \$8000 ? Perhaps as much as \$10,000 ?

Do you know that only \$2000 can provide 75 households in West Africa with critically needed protection kits to prevent the spread of the Ebola Virus?

75 households protected from Ebola!

What is the goal of this life? Is it to make sure that this year's vacation is more spectacular than last year's?

Is it about chasing after the new thrill, the next experience, the latest gadgets?

Is that what this life is all about?

I know that speaking this way makes me sound like such a party-pooper.

And I know that **MANY** people view God as the cosmic kill-joy who only wants to make our lives miserable, who only asks us to sacrifice

But that is not true. God's wants us to have joy – true joy, deep joy which comes when we live in harmony with our true nature.

Fish cannot live out of water. Trees do not grow apart from the soil.
And one cannot be truly human without practical acts of care and compassion.

Does traveling to new places every year make a person happy?
Does buying a carload of gifts on credit at supposedly discounted prices make a person happy?

Or does one discover real and lasting joy by caring for those in need, by sharing generously with the hungry, by helping a child orphaned by Ebola to have a meaningful future?

THIS is the challenge of today's parable. It will not allow us to skate through life by claiming to have the right ideas in our heads.

It tells us that acts of care and compassion are the defining moments of our lives.

BUT there is also good news in this parable, and we all need to hear it.

Remember that WE, as the least of these in Christ's family, are in the position of weakness and need, with our hands open, looking for help and assistance.

The Good News is that God provides it. All of this is GOD's work, GOD's ministry!
What is it that God declares through the prophet Ezekiel?

"I – GOD – will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak" (Ezekiel 34:16).

All of this is what GOD has done – and is doing – through the Messiah.
All of this is grace – the un-earned, undeserved, un-ending care of God in our lives.

Thanks be to God that we do not get what we deserve.
It seems that everywhere today people are talking about karma.
Have you noticed this? You know what karma is, right?

Karma is the Hindu word for the law of cause-and-effect.

For every action that we take, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

This basic human experience has consistently shaped people's view of the spiritual life. Every religious group in every society teaches some form of this cause-and-effect. You get what you deserve. Karma has become the popular term for it in our society today.

But guess what God tells us in these scriptures? **Karma is a lie.**

What God tells us in and through this Messiah is that we do not get what we deserve! No, we get far better than we deserve!

Do you know why I follow this King? Why I am willing to give my life for this King?

Because this is a King who serves.

Because I was naked, and this King clothed me. I was thirsty, and he gave me something to drink. I was sick and in prison, and this King came to visit me.

Jesus is the One who acts precisely the way that he calls us to act.

By seeking out the hungry, the naked, those in prison, and by not giving them what they deserve, but by showering them with compassion.

Karma is a lie. Grace is the truth of our lives. Compassion is the true nature of a disciple.

My friends, can you walk with our King on this path of life?

It's a path that does NOT demand your adherence to a set of abstract ideas.

It's a path that demands that you come to Christ - just like you do every time that you approach the Lord's Table - with open hands, aware of your need for help and assistance.

It's a path that calls you to join Christ in acts of service, care and generosity.

This is the path to a full and complete human life. Let's walk it together. Amen.