

Sunday of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46)¹

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When we meet someone we often ask them: ‘What do you do?’ and they say, ‘I am an architect, or a teacher, a doctor, or a nurse.’ Sometimes we ask young children: ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ and they say, ‘a fireman or a policeman, an athlete or a musician, a soldier or a politician.’ Occasionally we come across people, old as well as young, for whom the answers to these questions are not merely informational or aspirational. For these people, their lives are fixated on, and shaped by, what they are striving to become. Their goal to be such and such affects what they read and study, what college they attend, whether they go to graduate school, what friends they associate with, what extracurricular activities they chose, and so forth. When we have a goal to become a certain type of person, it structures everything else in our life.

In light of today’s Gospel, we might extend these questions: ‘What do you want to be at the Last Judgment Seat?’ What do you want to be when all is said and done, and the final evaluation of your life is being revealed to you?’ And the answer is pretty simple: I want to be a sheep. It does not matter if I was a doctor or a lawyer, or a nuclear physicist, or an astronaut, or if I went to Mars. It does not matter if I was a bricklayer, or a stay-at-home mom, or a stay-at-home dad. In the final analysis there are only two “occupations,” and I would rather be a sheep than a goat. If we really reflected on this in a way in which a young child might reflect on what would be involved in being a doctor, or a lawyer, it will start to shape our lives differently.

We know, from our Lord’s words in the Gospel of St. John, when He talks about being the Good Shepherd, He says that the sheep are those who hear His voice: “I know My sheep and am known by My own” (Jn. 10:14). He goes out before them: “... and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (Jn. 10:3-4). So there is a calling, a voice, an invitation to which we can respond or ignore. The sheep respond to his voice. If we want to be a sheep, we learn to respond to his voice, and this Gospel, in a way, tells us very specifically what that voice sounds like—as a metaphor of course—but, nevertheless, what it sounds like.

Today’s Gospel passage emphasizes how sheep and goats differ, but we might ask, “What is it that the sheep and the goats have in common?” The answer is simple: both the sheep and the goats have lives that include ample opportunity for acts of mercy. Both the sheep and the goats have many people in their lives that are needy, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, or shut-in. This is true for every single person. Every one of us has people in our lives that are weak

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and vulnerable; and it turns out, in this Gospel text, that is our Lord's call; it is the sound of His voice. To change the metaphor, when we see someone in need, someone who is thirsty, or hungry, or shut-in, or weak in some way, that is our Lord calling us; that is our Lord's voice. Maybe we think when our Lord calls us He wants us to be rich, or famous, or strong and powerful, or successful in some way in the eyes of the world, but in this Gospel text it is very clear that His call comes in the form of the weak and the broken, the destitute, and the downcast.

The difference, of course, between the sheep and the goats is how they respond to that call. It is exactly like what our Lord says in the Gospel of John, that it is the sheep who will respond to His call; and His call comes in this rather strange way by our world's standards.

So, there is this common element for all of us: that we are exposed to people of need. Sometimes we think that we need to go out and look for them, but for example, many of us have aging parents, and our parents are in need. They are getting weaker, more frail, mentally not as sharp; maybe dementia is creeping in. Sometimes, when we hear a Gospel text like this, we do not think of the people closest in our lives. We do not think of our ailing children, or our discouraged spouse. We do not think of the shut-ins in our parish, or a coworker who lost a job. We should think, first and foremost, of those people that God has placed in our lives, as close as they may be. These are the people God asks us to respond to. Sure, it is a wonderful thing to go to volunteer at a nursing home, to visit those in nursing homes, to go to prisons, or to write a letter to people in prison; that is very helpful and encouraging. There are many different things that we can do. I would not want to discourage any of those, but I simply want to emphasize and focus on the fact that it is so easy for us not to notice that suffering people are already right in our very presence.

I like to recall the words of Fr. Roman when he used to say, "why did God give us this description of the Last Judgment? He gave it to us to show us how easy it is to enter the Kingdom." It is amazing! When we hear this text, I think there is a certain sort of fear that comes over us; it is very sobering. Look at the text. I do not have to be particularly smart, or wise, or educated. I do not need a Ph.D to give somebody a cup of water, to visit them in prison, to write a note to a shut-in. I do not even need money to do any of these things. I do not have to have any particular virtues that are 'virtues of the world.' I really do not have any excuse. I have opportunity. Even in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Man had opportunity. It is so easy. Why do we sometimes find it so hard? I think, in a certain way, the answer is quite simple: it is because it costs us our whole life.

To be with the vulnerable, to really be with them, not just to write a check to an organization who helps them, (that might be a wonderful thing to do too, but I do not think that is the sort of thing our Lord had in mind in this parable); to be with the broken, the downcast, the vulnerable

requires us to become that way ourselves. It requires us to get off our own thrones; to get away from this ego that we have; this sense of self, this need to succeed in worldly ways, and in a sense to descend, in the same way that our Lord descended to us. Not to be over those who are so hurting, and so broken, but to be with them.

This text, of course, is so reminiscent of the Beatitude that we sing in the Liturgy, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7). It expresses that so perfectly and beautifully. Who are the ones who receive mercy from the Lord? The sheep—the ones who themselves are merciful. We should not, however, think of this somehow as a payback; that the sheep earned God’s mercy by themselves being merciful; that the sheep deserve mercy. That would make no sense at all, because you do not deserve mercy, it is something you get in spite of the fact that you do not deserve it. The words, “blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy,” reveal something to us about these people who are recipients of God’s mercy.

It might well be expressed in the words of our Lord, also in the Sermon on the Mount: “Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). He is the One Who lets the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous, and lets the sun shine on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45); Who loves those who hate Him; Who treats everyone with this outpouring of love. To be merciful, as our Father in Heaven is merciful, is to have come to a place in life where we ourselves become the living vessels of the Living God; where God’s mercy is the mercy that has so infused our lives, that we ourselves become expressions of that mercy in the world; that we have so fully set aside our longing for earthly goals, for worldly achievements that will perish at the Second Coming, and have traded all of these for the things that will abide forever: those characteristics that adorn the inner soul, so that our Lord Himself will take residence there. Not the virtues that the world offers us, but the virtues that are produced by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In summary we can say, in answer to these questions, what does it mean to be a sheep? What does it mean to long for this as our vocation; to respond to this call that our Lord gives us in these, maybe less obvious ways? it means to become deified; to be as our Father is in Heaven; to be so completely infused with His presence that we live a divine life. Not the life of a physician, or the life of a teacher, or a lawyer, but the life of the Son of God. A sheep is one who has so completely responded to that call that he has been transformed by it through these simple acts of mercy in the different, little events in our lives. When we set aside our own plans, our own goals, our own aspirations, our own schedule saying, ‘I do not have time for this person,’ to set all that aside and let God interrupt us, we set aside the excuses. When this becomes a pattern in our life, when we respond to that call, that call starts to change us, so that the Living God more and more fully inhabits every corner of our life. So that it is not our mercy, but His mercy that is being

given to these people that He has placed in our lives. It is not about the works we do, but about our lives with Christ; this is the one thing that we are called for as human beings.