

WHEN YOU DID THIS TO THE LEAST OF THESE YOU DID TO ME

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Feast of Christ the King

If you have read the latest newsletter you know that I am re-landscaping the front of my home. The world of my front yard, like our world today, has seen some drastic change. My neighbor cut down three large trees and what had been a very shady area is now bathed in bright sunlight. Now this has caused me to rethink what is growing in the front of the house. What has worked in the past, no longer can grow. Now if you have not read my article about the parallels between my garden and what I see happening at St. Aidan's please take a moment and read that article¹.

What I have encountered over the last week is the lesson that planting a garden is easy. The shrubs went in with little effort. However that was only because I spent a lot of time preparing the ground. Preparing the ground is hard. One of the problems that I faced was that the soil was depleted. There were no nutrients left to support the new plants. So it was off to the nursery for bags Black Gold cow manure and mushroom compost. This was then carefully worked into the soil to break up the clay and provide something to feed my new plants. The most wonderful plants in the world will die if they are planted in depleted soil.

Today we celebrate Cristos Rex, Christ the King who came for our salvation, but we need to be prepared for that salvation. Advent, which begins next Sunday is about preparing the ground for the blessed event of the birth of our Savior Jesus on Christmas. The joy and love of Christmas however will fade like a broken toy if we have not prepared the ground in advance. On this last day of the church year where we celebrate Christ the King I cannot help but look ahead to this wonderful but challenging time we call Advent. Whether we are looking to welcome the baby Jesus or Christ the King into the garden of our lives, the soil must be prepared.

We are saved for a purpose. Christ reigns as the king and became human on Christmas to save us for more than just our personal benefit. We hear in our Eucharistic prayer that time and again God called to us through prophets and humanity did not listen. We stayed self-centered and worried that our little corner of the world was safe. So finally he sent his Son as the perfect example of what it means to be fully human. We are saved not just to know Christ, but also in order to make Christ known to the world. Today's gospel gives us an example of how we are commanded to do that.

¹ The newsletter can be found at
<http://www.aidanvbva.net/Aidan%27sNewsletter.html>

One thing that is fascinating is the reaction of those labeled and sheep and goats. When faced with the examples that Jesus lists, the righteous are as surprised as the unrighteous at the assessment of their lives.

Here is a critical piece in that Jesus is not saying that there is a checklist that gets us into heaven. OK fed the hungry, check. Gave clothing to the naked, check, etc. Everything is checked and now I get to go to heaven. The righteous have been doing the right thing all along and were not being intentional about the acts. They were not doing what they did to rack up points so God lets them in to the kingdom.

This is one of the differences between doing things to get a tax deduction and as an act of true caritas, charity. I mentioned this a couple weeks ago. It is sad that one of the great fears that in tax reform if charitable deductions are eliminated or restricted people will stop or decrease giving. Are we that shallow? Do we as a country miss the gospel imperative that is in this lesson? I certainly hope not.

This passage is the only view of the final judgment in all of Matthew. Think then for a moment about what he says is the basis. Think too about our baptismal promises where we promise to respect the dignity of every human being, not just the ones we think deserve respect. That promise makes me as nervous as this parable for it is an incredibly high standard!

However true acts of charity and compassion bring rewards we never expect.

When you ask my family about their most memorable Christmas I suspect they would all remember things like gathering as a family with a fire in the fireplace and watching George C. Scott in the Christmas Carol. We still do that every year, even scattered around the globe.

However the greatest memory for my immediate family is when we took the time during Advent to live into today's parable. St. Paul's in Cleveland Heights is the largest Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Ohio and one of the largest churches in Cleveland. Because of our size we always fed the people at a hunger center housed in large Baptist Church in downtown Cleveland on the last Monday of the month. By then most families had run out of their food stamps and welfare checks and the crowds were huge. The Monday before Christmas we prepared a huge Christmas dinner for the clients of this center. As our boys got older and learned to play musical instrument, Wendy, Jeff, James and myself would take our instruments down and play Christmas Carols during the meal. By the way this was the only time the rector allowed any Christmas Carols prior to Christmas Day.

One night a very bedraggled woman came in, what most of us would call a bag lady. We could smell her as she approached us. She sat down on the edge of the stage and listened for a few moments. When we stopped briefly she asked if we knew O Holy Night. We had the music and so we started to play. All of a sudden she stood up and started singing. Her voice was incredible. Clear, perfectly in tune and carried

through the entire room. People began to really listen and then some chose by started singing. Soon the entire room was singing. We then took another request and then another. The room filled with people joined together in praising the birth of our savior.

Do I remember what gifts we exchanged that year. No I don't, because this one moment was and is so precious. We never expected to create a memory that would last a lifetime that night, but we did. My family received a gift beyond price that night. That night we learned what this parable means. We were as surprised by grace as the sheep who said, "when did we see you hungry, thirsty or naked?"

Why am I talking about Advent now, because by the time we hit the first Sunday of Advent it is too late to stop and consider. By the time we hit the first Sunday of Advent, Black Friday has already come and gone and the frenzy has begun. We stand at a crossroads where we again this year have a choice of how we will prepare our garden during Advent.

So my challenge, my question to you is what kind of gifts will you give your family this Christmas? What kind of memories will you make? What lessons will you teach? What example will you provide for your family and the world? How will you prepare for the arrival of Christ the King?