

The Last Judgment

"When the Son of Man comes in glory...all the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will come and say to those on His right hand, 'Come you blessed of My Father inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'..... Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me; sick and in prison and you did not visit Me'....." (Matthew 25)

The gospel reading for the Sunday of the Last Judgment says nothing about the heavens and the earth being shaken, of stars falling and the moon being darkened--in short, it says nothing about the things that many people like to associate with the so called "End Times". It says nothing at all about doctrine and dogma, either, for that matter.

To be sure, the gospel and the kontakion mention the "fire" associated with everlasting damnation--a fire which has been the subject of endless (and some would be so bold as to say, *pointless*) speculation and debate over the centuries. But the heart of the gospel lesson for this Sunday has to do with **salvation**. The heart of the gospel is ***always*** about salvation and never about damnation. That has to be clearly understood.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, our Lord was making it stunningly clear that on the Last Day we will be judged according to how well we loved one another; according to how well we loved our neighbor (And who is our neighbor? Why, everyone we meet, of course). Jesus tells us that there will be no compromise here and that there will be clear criteria to be met in order to pass the test. Did we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, clothe the naked? Did we do this on the literal, physical level? Did we do it on the emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels?

Let's not fool ourselves into believing that we can get off the hook. There is plenty of obvious physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual suffering within a few miles of every household in our parishes (not to mention in this vast world) that demands our attention. Call any local nursing home, or group home for the retarded or mentally ill, and ask if they could use a volunteer to visit someone who has no family contact. Food pantries are usually desperate

for help. Pro life organizations such as Problem Pregnancy will never say no to donations of time or goods, and the list goes on. And its never a one time deal. We are called to give over and over again because the needy and suffering will present themselves over and over again--until the Last Day.

We need to be careful here, however, because we are not called to be social workers in our service to our brothers and sisters in need. ***We are called to give because we see Christ in them--because in their faces we see His face.*** This is a very different approach from that of a social worker (and social work is a good and blessed form of service). We do not serve because we believe that in so doing we will improve the world. *We serve because we love our neighbor*, we really do. And we love our neighbor because we are convinced that Christ loves him and us; and in this mystery of love we cannot help but reach out and feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and do whatever other works of mercy required of us to fulfill our calling as Christians.

The question each of us faces today is the same one we always face: What is the ***true*** disposition of my heart? How am I disposed toward my neighbor (each and everyone else--be it family, friends, co-workers, strangers)? And what am I ***doing*** to ***prove*** it?

Once again, today's gospel is not about damnation; it's about salvation. The gospel is always and only about salvation. The goats are mentioned because

some people will **choose** to stand on the left. No one will force them to be there. In fact, this gospel makes clear that ***no one is a goat except by choice; just as no is a sheep except by choice.*** **We choose whether we will love our neighbor or turn our back on him.**

Notice too, that the Lord, when He comes, will not quiz us about our doctrinal correctness. It will be sufficient that His Church keeps her doctrines pure and that we are obedient, but He will not quiz us personally about our astuteness in knowing the canons and dogmas. He will not even quiz us about our fasting. He will ask us about how well we loved one another and test us with the simple and crystal clear criteria mentioned in today's gospel.