

The Second-Last Sunday of the Church Year
November 17, 2024


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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

A GREAT REVERSAL

Daniel 7:9-14, II Peter 3:3-14; Matthew 25:31-46

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

n the lessons appointed for today, which you have just heard, we get glimpses of the entire new testament era. From Daniel: we saw with the visionary prophet the ascension and enthronement of our Lord. You are more familiar, perhaps with the disciples watching Jesus ascend in the cloud. This is the other side of that event, the scene unfolding from the heavenly perspective as the Lord, rising on the clouds is now escorted into the heavenly throne room. And having been brought to His Father (the Ancient of Days), Daniel reports, that He “was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.”

Then from St. Peter we get a glimpse of the life of the Church after His ascension, the period of waiting until He comes again. It is a time in which faith is tested, and in which many who should have eagerly awaited their Lord's return, question whether or not He will ever come back at all, and, falling away live as if the kingdom of this world with its temptations and delights, is all there really is. For Peter says, “scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.” But St. Peter assures us that our Lord will keep His promise and that He will indeed return: “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.” Yes all of those things that people thought would endure forever, all of those earthly hopes and plans and accomplishments, all of the ways that they fulfilled their lusts and served their own flesh, will be consumed in judgment.

But here Peter also gives us another aspect of this time of waiting, this time in which we now dwell, that it is a time God has allotted for repentance - that is, for turning from our sins, for rejecting the lusts of the flesh, and for turning in humility to Jesus for mercy and for grace. It is the time of the preaching of the Gospel and of faith. It is the time in which we are called to put our trust in Christ Jesus and “according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new

earth in which righteousness dwells.”

Finally in the Gospel for this day, Jesus speaks of the day of His return, the day of judgment, and for the faithful the day of salvation! “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His 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...” What a great reversal will have taken place, has, in truth, already taken place with our Lord’s ascension. For now we see the Shepherd who was stricken that the sheep be scattered alive with power and gathering the sheep to Himself. Now we see Him who came to suffer the judgment of all, sitting in judgment over all.

One of the great medieval bishops, St. Ivo of Chartres speaks in similar terms of this great day our Lord foretells: “In the first coming, He came to justify the wicked; in the second, He will come to condemn the wicked. He first came to call back those who were straying; in the second, He will glorify those who are converted. In the first coming, Christ was handed over to an unjust death for the wicked; in the second, He will hand over the wicked to a just death. In the first coming, He came to reform us inwardly to the image of God; in the second, He “will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body.”

There is a reversal of things not just for Jesus, but for we who follow Jesus too! What Holy Mary prophesied in the Magnificat is come to pass for the whole Church: “He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.” We see this great reversal of things when the sentence is given for the sheep: “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.” And the faithful protest, when did we ever see you these conditions and do these things for you. And Jesus answers them: “inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” The sheep in their humility count their works as nothing. They know that they have not served the Lord as well as they should. They presume no credit for whatever small things they have actually done. They know even that they did not always and without fail show kindness and care to their brothers and sisters. And yet, because their trust is not in their works but rather in their Savior, their sins against God and their neighbors, as well as their failures to do good to others have been removed from them by Christ. And what remains are only the good things they have done in Him and to Him. And these works bear testimony to their faith. And the Lord is pleased with them and even with their meager acts of love.

The goats on the other hand, those who pride themselves on their own worth

and dignity, who think that they have will have earned God's favor through their own goodness and through their relatively good way of life, these are sent away into torment. Whatever good they may have done for their neighbors does them no good at all. And every failure to do good is held up before them as evidence that they are in reality not sheep of Christ's flock at all.

If you stand on your works you will be condemned on the Last Day. But if you humble yourself to receive Christ's grace, and then live by humble faith, not only will you do good as a fruit of faith, the Spirit active in you to bring them about, often without your even realizing it, but your failures to do so are forgotten, left behind where they have already been judged at the cross of Christ Jesus, who took your sins and your shame as if they were His own and suffered the harsh justice they have deserved to free you from the pain and wrath and torment you would have earned by them. Instead of the fiery condemnation of God, you will hear Him say, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world..."

Now I want to say something more about the works Jesus details in this passage. As I have said, in the case of the sheep, their works bear witness to their faith. In the case of the goats, their works and failures to do them bear witness to their unbelief. But what are the works under consideration. Here Jesus lists works of compassion and charity done toward one's brothers and sisters in Christ, that is toward your fellow Christians, feeding them when they are hungry, giving drink to them when thirsty, being hospitable to the stranger, clothing them when naked, visiting them when sick and when imprisoned. But our works of love toward our fellow believers are not to be limited to those in such dire straits. There are other good things we do in service to our brothers and sisters in the faith, and these things too, given and done freely in love even when the need is not so great, are also done to Christ.

They are done to Christ, because all who are baptized and believe are united with Christ. Baptized into His death and resurrection, we are in Him and He is in us. We are, each one of us, clothed with His righteousness, we bear His Name, we are marked by His cross. Every one of us is a Christ bearer before the world and a Christ bearer toward one another. And where there is faith, there is also a life lived in the community of faith, a life lived among the brethren.

The works Jesus speaks of today on the surface of things pertain to our bodily needs, which some of us have at times, and other times do not. But these conditions of being hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and imprisoned also point to conditions of the soul. And in this regard we who though saints in Christ are still poor sinners, always stand in need. So among Christians there is not only care given to bodily needs, but also to spiritual needs: a building up of one another in the Faith. So St. Jude exhorts us: "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." Likewise St. Paul encourages us to, "comfort each other

and edify one another.” So also the writer to the Hebrews: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” These things we must pursue with one another and for one another, while not neglecting physical needs and acts of love either. For if we love Christ, we must love one another in whom Christ dwells.

And now we stand somewhere between Christ’s ascension and His return. Yes, we are living in that time that our Lord has given for repentance and for the exercise of faith, that time when we are called both to humble ourselves and to live in faith as members of Christ’s flock, as brothers and sisters who know one another as Christ bearers. Let us live righteously then, repenting of our sins, and looking to Christ for our goodness and for our salvation. And may the Holy Spirit so fill us that we overflow with love and good works that these things may bear witness to our faith in Jesus. And may we look forward in faith to the time when our Lord will at the last return, when the waiting is ended, when the nations are gathered, and the flock is united to the Shepherd forever, according to His promise, looking for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, in which our Lord Jesus dwells. Now to Him who sits upon the throne, who is coming again to judge the world, to Him be all glory and honor with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen. And you have a part in this kingdom not because you have earned it by doing good, but through the merits and grace of Christ Jesus who gives it to you in love. Receive with thanksgiving and faith, for He is coming. May He keep us in His kingdom and for His kingdom until that great day. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +