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by Mary M. McGlone

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The end of the world. How do you imagine it? In 1920, Robert Frost pondered this same question in the poem, “Fire and Ice”:

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I’ve tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

The feast of Christ the King offers us three different visions of the final days. The first, from the prophet Ezekiel, suggests that, at the end of the world, God will finally appear as the good shepherd to rescue the lost and forsaken. Because the rulers and religious leaders have sought only their own good, God promises to come and seek out the lost, bind up the wounded, and provide pasture for all except the “sleek and strong.” The latter are the ones who took advantage and allowed the others to languish. On one hand, that’s a typical apocalyptic vision: The good will be vindicated and the wicked will get what they deserve. At the same time, the image of this vindicator is not the fierce warrior but a gentle shepherding God who redeems and restores what others have let languish.

Matthew’s Jesus gives us the most electrifying image of the end times. We read about how the Son of Man appears in glory, seated on a throne, surrounded by angels who gather all the world to be judged. It’s a favorite theme of fire and brimstone preachers as well as artists. We know Michelangelo’s depiction from the Sistine Chapel. The traditional Byzantine icon of this scene shows Christ seated at top center with Mary and John the Baptist on either side of him pleading for sinners. The apostles are seated around with a dragon poised below breathing the fire that consumes the condemned as they complete their fall from grace.

The image from Matthew recognizes the responsibility of the people themselves. In Ezekiel, they were passive and their fate was determined by their shepherds. They just followed where they were led — literally a lot more like sheep than human beings who have gone through adolescence and know the difference between rebellion and collaboration. In Matthew, the ones sent to the eternal fire are those who refused to give hospitality or care to those sent in Christ’s name. By spurning God’s representatives, they rejected all that God offered them. They sealed their fate by closing their doors.

The third image in today’s Scriptures comes from Paul’s faith in the universal effects of Christ’s resurrection. Paul’s vision of the end is closer to that of John the Evangelist than to Matthew. John lets us in on Jesus’ vision that in dying he would draw all to himself (John 12:32) and that through him all will be one (17:21). Paul looks to the moment when God will be all in all, when everyone is drawn into the life and love of God.

All three images come from our tradition and reveal something about God and where this universe is headed. All three images see God’s love at the heart of

human history and the history of the universe itself.

The first image emphasizes God's saving love and grace, reminding us that our life is a gift and the God named Emmanuel will be with us always. The second image reminds us that we have been given freedom and that, as we choose how to live, we are fashioning our eternal future. The third way of looking at the end goes along with what scientist theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin see as Christ the Omega Point who is drawing all creation toward being caught up in the very energy of God.

How will the world end? Our vision of where it is going will affect every step we take. There are moments when we need the comforting image of God as shepherd to assure us that what is beyond our control has not escaped the realm of God's potential to save. At other moments, we need to be confronted with the starkness of the separation of sheep and goats, reminding us that the choices we make create our future. Both of those approaches can lead us to Paul's mystical vision and hope for union with God and all God's creation.

Teilhard offers us a hope and vision that go with Robert Frost's first option. He says, "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

### **EZEKIEL 34:11-12, 15-17**

God promises to shepherd the just after condemning the wicked shepherds who loved meat and wool, more than sheep. The wicked shepherds symbolized Israel's self-serving leaders. Chapter 34 of Ezekiel begins by saying, "Son of man, prophesy ... Woe to the shepherds who have been pasturing themselves. You have consumed milk, wore wool, and slaughtered fatlings, but the flock you did not pasture." Our reading begins with God's decision to step in because the sheep have become plunder.

Ezekiel goes into great detail about the needs of the sheep. They have been scattered in cloudy and dark places, a reference to the Babylonian exile. When God promises to "tend" them, that doesn't necessarily mean that God will remove all danger. In Psalm 23, rather than eliminate the danger, we say the Lord remains with us in the dark valley.

The second danger Ezekiel mentions is being lost. God will seek out the lost, and, when they have been injured, will bind their wounds and heal their ills. Then comes the unexpected line: “The sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly.” Since when is destruction the right way to shepherd? Who are the sleek and strong?

By now we’ve left the realm of animal husbandry and entered the metaphorical world in which the flock is the people of God. When some are lost, injured and ill with no one to care for them, the sleek are the ones who allow that to happen. When there’s a famine, a fattened neighbor carries on his body the proof of his lack of solidarity. The divine shepherd who cares for the whole flock cannot put up with that.

The last line of our reading, “I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats,” is often assumed to imply that goats are bad. But that is not necessarily the case. Goats are relatives of the sheep, and although they will eat a more varied diet — tin cans included — they were not considered unclean. The significant difference is between the sleek and the sick, those who serve themselves and those left in want. Ezekiel’s prophecy is that God will reverse the condition of the needy, even at the expense of those whose concern has been only for themselves.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-26, 28**

Our reading begins with the proclamation: “Christ has been raised.” Christians of the Orthodox and Byzantine traditions use that as a greeting throughout the 50 days of Eastertide. While most Christians recite long creeds that speak of creation, incarnation, the work of the Spirit and the holy Catholic Church, this proclamation is the core of the Christian faith. It tells us where we are going. A few verses before this reading Paul said, “If Christ has not been raised, then empty is our preaching, empty too is your faith.”

Paul wrote from his own world of meaning. He believed Adam, the first human being, set the agenda for human life from his moment onward and that meant that all of creation was subject to death. Then came Christ who changed the story. Christ opened up humanity’s destiny to what God had always intended — life and union of all in God. While Paul’s symbolism and images come from a worldview we no longer hold, the message remains valid. It is the same teaching Paul expressed in Romans

8: All creation awaits its future in God, a future made possible in Christ.

When Paul speaks here of Christ as the “firstfruits” of those who have fallen asleep, he is speaking of believers’ identification with Christ which he understands as genuine union. It goes beyond solidarity, friendship or even love. For Paul, belonging to Christ means that believers have actually become part of him. His life is ours, and we participate in his future. That is another expression of what he said in Galatians 2:19-20: “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.” Being in Christ changes everything.

Another core idea Paul shares in this passage is his vision of the trajectory of creation. He sees Christ’s resurrection and return to the Father as the turning point of history. From the moment of his resurrection, everything is moving toward union with God. Paul describes this as Christ’s process of overcoming every other power. That process will be fulfilled when death comes to an end.

Paul wants his readers to understand that this is a process that has already begun and will continue until its end at a time that will come, but which, cannot be predicted. Paul uses his era’s apocalyptic images for this as he describes the destruction of powers and authorities and all enemies coming under Christ’s feet. Teilhard de Chardin had another set of images built on an understanding of evolution and Christ drawing all creation forward into union with God in Christ. No matter which images one chooses, both convey the deeper truth that the trajectory of life is moving toward union with God.

In the long run, Paul wants us to contemplate what he has said, to remember and marvel at what we have been given and what we are promised in Christ. As we celebrate Christ the King, we might concentrate on three dimensions of that message. First, we remember that Christ’s resurrection is the most basic tenet of our faith; there is no Christianity without the resurrection. Second, we recall that Christ’s resurrection has changed history: Everyone who is in Christ participates in his life and will share his future. Third, we remember that God is drawing all things into participation in divine life. Together, these convictions tell us about our past, present and future; they ground us in a life-changing, life-giving vision of who we are becoming.

**MATTHEW 25: 31-46**

The description of the last judgment begins with the triumphant Son of Man coming in glory. It's a scene filled with references to apocalyptic images from the Hebrew Scriptures and first-century politics. This is the glorious Christ, surrounded by angelic agents of resurrection and judgment.

The parable is the crown of Jesus' reversal stories; contemporary scholars suggest that it does not say what most people generally think it does. When the triumphant Son of Man identifies with the lowliest of his brethren, we have learned to think of them as the poor of the world. But based on how Matthew has used the terms for the lowly and brethren, most commentators suggest that they are not the poor in general; they are the Christian missionaries, the new family of Jesus, who go out representing him. This does not disparage service of the poor, it simply says that Jesus was not referring to the generic poor of the world in this parable. He was talking about his missionary disciples, the lowly ones who evangelized in his name.

A second dimension of the parable that we often fail to note is that the historical Jesus spoke of the glorious Son of Man just before he entered into his own passion, the time when he would appear in public at his weakest and most rejected. Except when we read the Gospel of John, the images of Christ in glory and Jesus who suffered in weakness and rejection seem to be polar opposites. But the parable actually weaves them together, indicating that the Son of Man will appear before humanity in hunger and thirst, imprisoned, naked and weak. He appears this way both in his historical passion and death and through those brothers and sisters who carried on his mission. Therefore, the judgment of the nations rests on whether they accept and love a God who does not mirror the powers of the world but comes among them as a suffering servant.

Pope Pius XI established this feast in 1925 as an antidote to secularism and the church's loss of power and prestige in Europe. At a time when the Vatican had very little tolerance for democracies and freedom of religion, Pius wrote the encyclical *Quas Primas* which established the feast. Pius explained his hope that the fruits of the feast would give royal honors to our Lord and that "Men will doubtless be reminded that the Church [was] founded by Christ as a perfect society" (QP 31). There is evangelical irony and a sign of the work of the Spirit in the fact that the readings for the feast of Christ the King of the Universe all depict Jesus in his weakness, yet the feast itself was established in protest to the church's loss of power and prestige.

Today, our celebration of Christ our King invites us to consider what we believe about where we and the universe are ultimately headed. Do we consider the difference the resurrection makes?

## **Planning: Christ the King**

By: Lawrence Mick

The Solemnity of Christ the King poses a challenge each year involving how we understand kingship in relation to Christ, who refused to be called a king during his earthly life. Today's first reading and Gospel seem to focus our attention this year on Christ as our judge. The first reading ends with these words: "I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats." The Gospel depicts the risen Christ as our judge at the end of time.

The image of judge, however, is tempered somewhat by the fact that both readings depict the judge as a shepherd, too. Shepherds care for the sheep, so the image of the judge is not one focused primarily on condemnation. Certainly, the point of proclaiming both readings is to urge us to live so that we will be recognized as faithful sheep ready for the glory of the kingdom.

The Gospel passage from Matthew gives this feast a strong focus on charity and justice as the criteria for being good sheep. This meshes quite well with the annual collection for the Campaign for Human Development (CHD) that is scheduled for this weekend. (Materials and more information about CHD can be found at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org).)

It should be fairly easy to link the Gospel with CHD, both for preachers and for planners. Petitions, for example, could be based on the various categories of people in need that Jesus lists in the Gospel account: those without enough food, those with no access to clean water, immigrants who are strangers in our midst, those who need clothing and shelter, the sick and homebound, and those in our prisons and jails.

At the same time, simply praying for such people is not enough. CHD is one way to help many of them. There are also many other channels for our energy, both for

charitable work and for striving for justice. Many of the needy people on that list have been subject to unjust laws, inequitable distribution of resources and wealth, climate devastation, inadequate wages, insufficient opportunities to deal with addictions, etc. Preaching and prayers should include cries for justice as well as charity.

**World AIDS Day:** Friday of this week is World AIDS Day. While many people in the developed world can now manage this disease with antiviral drugs, it is still a difficult and diminished life. Many people are still contracting HIV every day, so continued education and services are needed. Around the world, many with HIV do not have access to these life-saving drugs, so the pandemic is not over. Include a petition for them in the intercessions this weekend and perhaps some current information on AIDS in the bulletin this week or next. More information at [www.awarenessdays.com/awareness-days-calendar/world-aids-day-2017](http://www.awarenessdays.com/awareness-days-calendar/world-aids-day-2017)

## **Prayers: Christ the King**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Some of the most dramatic biblical imagery comes on this last Sunday of our liturgical year. The overall imagery on this feast is striking: Israel's rulers do not adequately care for their people. So, God will do it, as both shepherd and judge. But, the responsibility for the neediest shifts in the Gospel. When the Son of Man comes in glory, he will judge us for our acts of mercy. We cannot look to God to care for those in need. The job is now ours, and the King now judges us.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you declared that you will come again in glory: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you will judge us on our treatment of others: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you challenge us to care for the least among us: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray now for all who are in need and for us who are called to care for them.



**Minister** For all of us in the church, who will be judged on our care for the least among us ... we pray,

- For all leaders responsible for promoting peace and justice throughout the world ... we pray,
- For those who feel no responsibility for the well-being of others ... we pray,
- For a national will to provide for the most vulnerable, both here and abroad ... we pray,
- For institutions and organizations whose efforts to care for others are undercut by political or economic priorities ... we pray,
- For those living with HIV/AIDS and for those who love and care for them ... we pray,
- For those in this community whose needs have been overlooked or are unknown ... we pray,

**Presider** God, our protector and judge, we thank you for sending your Son to show us who you are and who we are called to be. Give us strength and courage to care for the least among us. Make us worthy to stand among those called to live in eternal life. We offer this prayer in the name of Christ, the King of the Universe. Amen.

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