

Last Pentecost
Christ the King
November 23, 2008

“The Powerless People of Pike County”

Today is the last Sunday in Pentecost; it is the last Sunday of the church’s calendar year A. It is the great feast of Christ the king. It is fitting on this day and in this Eucharist to wear white in celebration of Christ and his Kingship.

The Kingship of Christ is deeply biblical, finding its origins in the words of the prophets promising the coming of a Messiah, a King in the line of David, and ending with Jesus’ words to Pontius Pilate. “That was what he was born to, and why he came into the world.” Today’s Gospel reading sees Jesus in that role of sitting on a throne judging his people. It is not a role that we think of Jesus performing too often. We prefer Christ the teacher, the savior, the bringer of the good news of the Kingdom. Yet, we got a taste of this other side in last week’s Gospel parable of the slaves and the talents. The Gospel of Matthew gives a clear message that to whom much has been given, much will be expected.

Today’s Gospel turns Matthew’s world around. Even for teachers of Judaism it must have been hard to take; that the old order would be over turned and that privilege and position would matter little in the Messiah’s Kingdom. Jesus constantly in his teaching speaks of turning the established status quo upside down. In Jesus’ theology it is the weak and the meek who inherit the earth. It is the keepers of peace who will be rewarded. It is the humble who will be lifted up.

To that end, Jesus sends his disciples out to carry his message to the far corners of the known world. That message is reflected in today’s three readings. Despite the heavy reliance on analogy, Jesus is speaking of the basic human virtue that are bond up in pastoral care and looking after each other on this journey through life.

Ezekiel compares Israel and 12 tribes to sheep who God judges and leads till he finds a place of peace and prosperity for them. The author of the letter to the Ephesians speaks of the faith, hope, and love that must exist among all followers of Jesus that will lead to a precious inheritance. However, it is Jesus in Matthew 25 who speaks of what is truly expected of his followers. They are to be feeders of the hungry; the givers of water, the clothers of the naked, the greeter of strangers, the visitor to the prison, the carer of the sick and the righters of wrong.

To me, that aptly describes life in the parish in the last week. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have stood and seen you feed the poor, the unemployed and the distressed. The door bell that never stopped ringing was the music of giving last Friday. Those who collected in Queens and throughout the Tri-State are named into today’s Gospel.

Today’s Gospel tells that you did not give to the poor alone; you gave to Jesus himself from what God has given to you. That makes you the living proof of the Gospel that makes you social engineers, bringer of change, and an effective force in people’s lives.

The Food Pantry working at its best, pulled in Christians from all four denominations to work together to bring about changes in people’s lives. It was not only change for those who received. But change for those who gave of food, time or money.

So many of you have visited the sick, prayed for those seriously ill, visited hospital and prison. You are the social engineers of the Gospel. You are the people making a difference. You are the ones exerting Gospel power in Pike County. You are the righteous of the Gospel bound for the Kingdom of Heaven.

The work that so many people do from this church is as, every bit as important as voting in Presidential or local elections. Whether it is for Safe Haven, or the Karen Ann Quinlan Hospice it impacts people's lives. I have families in Michigan and in Tennessee who regularly support this church, because they know that the work of Christ's Gospel is going on here. They do not care that we are Episcopalian, or that we do not belong to their particular denomination. They care that we believe in the Gospel and living the discipleship that Christ daily calls us to.

How can I tell you and galvanize you into thinking that Thanksgiving is only the beginning of a cold hard winter for many people in the Tri-State area? How can I convince you that our efforts of Friday last must be repeated over and over in the months to come? Perhaps, I could do so by telling you a story. The sort of story that many pastors are party too, but cannot relate because of sacred trust and confidence. In this story the only lie is the names of the people involved.

Mary Jane and Eric were married for 14 years, when in February of 2007 Eric lost his job in Sussex County. They had three children Tyler, Dylan and Rachael. Eric expected to find a new job quickly, but it didn't work out that way. He was still unemployed in August of 2007. He started drinking.

Tired of coming home from work and finding him still in bed, Mary Jane nagged him to go out and find something. At the end of August '07 he left to join his brother and find work in Florida. She has not heard from him since.

In December Mary Jane had to move out of the house they rented and could no longer avoid. She moved into a trailer. Her mother would not let her come home for Thanksgiving that year, because she said the kids were too difficult to handle. Mary Jane knew that it was a lie. Her kids were good, her sister and brother in law didn't want them around.

Last year they spent Thanksgiving alone. There was no T.V. but the children could watch old movies on an old set. At the beginning of each week she makes a large pot of pasta and meat sauce that keeps the children going for days. She would have liked to have given them money for school lunch; instead she packs them a sandwich and a piece of fruit. She goes to the Food Pantry. Tyler the eldest helps her. They arrive at 5:30 and wait in line till 6:30. It is cold and the time seems to stand still, until the doors finally open. She recognizes familiar faces now. Her first few times picking up food she was self conscious, but now she is passed caring.

She chose to buy clothes for the children that Christmas. A few toys and books she picked up from the church. The people inside were nice but too busy to talk much. She wonders this year how she will get through the winter with heat and oil costs. During the day, she cleans other people's houses and at weekends mans a gas pump over at the Tri-State. She wonders why this is happening to her, when such a short time ago things looked so bright.

All around she see others who are worse off than herself. She feels sorry for them, but has too much to think about to worry about their situations. Most of all she worries about the children. They seem to be OK in school, but Dylan suffers from lots of colds.

At night they all play games such as Scrabble and Monopoly, but the kids would get bored and tire of it. They go to bed early with sleeping bags and lots of blankets and quilts.

Mary Jane stays up and washes clothes by hand. Bigger items she takes and uses the washer/dryer at one of the houses she cleans. She is sure the owner is aware but says nothing.

She climbs into bed next to Rachael, knowing that she will rise early. She hopes tomorrow will be a better day.

Today's Gospel is this year not an abstract concept or a mere lesson from scripture. Today's Gospel is a lived reality for many people. As we saw so poignantly last week, it is in the midst of hardship and tough times, that the very best comes out in so many Americans. They show a spirit of kindness and generosity that belongs to a former age. Poor people do not want our charity, they want our help.

Today's Gospels spell out for us what it means to be a disciple and follow Jesus. It tells us that somewhere in Pike County children are cold tonight. Somewhere in our hearts, is the Christian warmth they need to see them through the winter?

Amen+