

November 22, 2020 St. Augustine Crowley Center 11:30 a.m.

Thirty-Fourth/Last Sunday in Ordinary Time:

Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

As we're gathered together here today, we're only four days away from Thanksgiving, that beloved and always much-anticipated national holiday that typically introduces the beginning of the "Christmas season". However, due to COVID-19, this year's celebration of Thanksgiving is likely to be as unusual as we could ever imagine it. Of course, a major part of the Thanksgiving tradition that so many of us look forward to is to either travel to, or be the host for, family and friends to crowd together for the annual Thanksgiving Feast, followed or preceded by---or both---lots of football. This year, sadly, much of that will need to be done virtually, including for me and my very large, multi-generational family.

As unfortunate as that is, we all need to make sure that, whether we are gathered with people in person, or join with loved ones via the internet, we can't lose sight of what Thanksgiving means---we all must still give thanks to God for the long list of blessings that each of us enjoys, and pray that one day, sooner than later, this awful pandemic will be defeated, and life can return to some semblance of normalcy.

But even as the Thanksgiving holiday celebrates the beginning of the Christmas season, this 34th and Last Sunday in Ordinary Time celebrates the ending of this Liturgical Year by proclaiming our belief in, and love for, Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe.

"Endings" and "Beginnings"----our lives are filled with them. Some are major; others are minor; all of them are important. As we celebrate the "ending" of this Church Year, we are given a very important opportunity to reflect on our relationship with Jesus, and the quality of our Faith.

These last 9 months of this Pandemic have been so challenging in every aspect of all our lives, including in our Faith lives. For those of you who have been able to come to Mass in person over these past 6 months that we've been able to celebrate our Masses publicly, as well as for the vast majority of you who have not felt able or comfortable to come to Mass, how has all of this affected your Faith? How loudly and boldly do we proclaim, with our prayers of praise and our

deeds of love, that Jesus Christ is the Lord of my life! Or have we allowed those proclamations to grow more quiet, meek and uncertain?

Interestingly, the Scripture Readings which the Church selects for us to listen to on this great Feast don't focus so much on the image of a King, nor on royalty or power; really, just the opposite.

Let me ask: what "image" comes to your mind when you think of "God"? Some might think about an austere, ancient, distant Judge; others might think of the "rich Uncle" image who gives us what we want if we're good, or if he is in a good mood. However God's Holy Word doesn't reveal God in either of those ways. Rather, God is revealed as our Creator, as the One Who cares for us, and as a Loving, Good Shepherd, as we heard in today's first two Readings.

In our First Reading, we heard Ezekiel, speaking on God's behalf, say: *"As a Shepherd tends His flock, so will I tend My sheep;....the lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, (and) the sick I will heal."*

In addition, today's Psalm is from one of the most cherished of all the Psalms or any part of Scripture, Psalm 23: *"The Lord is my Shepherd; there is nothing I shall want."* That's very likely a Psalm that most of us know off by heart, and one that all of us, perhaps pray regularly, especially in times of fear, doubt or grief.

While it's essential that we have a clear sense that Jesus must be the King of our Hearts, in selecting these Readings today, the Church is going to great lengths to remind us that Jesus is not like the Kings of this world. He does not "lord it over" us; He does not stand apart from us; He does not treat us as underlings or servants. In fact, it's just the opposite; Jesus describes Himself as "One Who serves", as One Who has come to be with us, and as One Who lays down His life for His sheep.

But the image in today's Gospel is different from the image of God as Shepherd. Jesus teaches this Parable of the Last Judgment from the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew with a keen realization that while the people of this world were about to judge Him and condemn Him to death, one day He would return in Glory to provide a Day of Judgment for all the people of the world. As Jesus tells this Parable of the Son of Man coming at the end of all time, people are gathered from all nations and from all periods of human history. The "King/Shepherd" sits on a "glorious throne", and separates the people into just two groups, *"as a shepherd separates sheep from goats"*. I read somewhere that

was a normal thing that shepherds did at the end of each day so that the flocks could sleep and be cared for according to their particular needs; but it was something so basic and ordinary, that if possible, the Shepherd would have an assistant, or even his child, take care of that process of separating these two groups from one another. But in Jesus' Parable, this is the "ultimate" separation, and it's for the purpose of a Judgment, which is why the King must be the one to separate the "sheep" from the "goats", placing the "*sheep on his right*" and the "*goats on his left*".

There's nothing inherently good about sheep; there are what we sometimes call "black sheep", or "lost sheep", just as there are good and faithful sheep; similarly there's nothing inherently bad about goats; in fact the "scape goat" is used in Scripture as an image of God's mercy. The "twist" to this powerful Parable is that the Judgment is not done by the King sitting on the glorious throne; the Judgment results from the choices and decisions that each has person made in their lifetime. The question is: do we choose to see "Jesus" in others and treat them accordingly, or to not do so.

Many of you would know this better than I---especially those of you who are "teachers", which, these days, probably includes most parents and grandparents who are helping their children since education is being provided both virtually and in person: but I assume the students still have to take "exams". None of us likes to do that. Every student knows that they need to study for the exam, and if they know the information, they will do well; if not, they might fail.

The Final Judgment is kind of like a Final Life Exam, except there is only one question, with six separate parts. The question is: "**What did you do for the least of my brothers and sisters?**" And the six parts to that question are: "**Did you feed the hungry? Did you give drink to the thirsty? Did you extend a welcome to the stranger? Did you provide clothing to the naked? Did you console the sick? Did you visit the imprisoned?**" And, of course, these 6 Corporal Works of Mercy, as we have come to know them, are to "open the door" to related acts of mercy, kindness, generosity, compassion and forgiveness that we should be doing, for those in our lives who need them. These are not "Essay" Questions, in which we can list our reasons, or our excuses, or our rationale for why we did, or didn't, do what we did. There are only "Yes" and "No" answers. Jesus doesn't use some indiscriminate gauge to determine who comes into Heaven, such as the: "*iney, meeny, miney mo*" method, or the lottery method; it's not a subjective decision, Jesus doesn't show favoritism. No, Jesus has made it very, very clear to us

throughout our lifetime what it takes for us to be able to hear those wonderful words at the end of our lives: *“Come and inherit the Kingdom of my Father.”*

Today’s Second Reading from St. Paul’s first Letter to the Corinthians reminds us that Jesus has already won the gift of salvation for us through His death and resurrection----what he calls *“the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep”* And then, St. Paul goes on to conclude that *“those who belong to Christ”* will share in Jesus’ Victory. Does that include us? Do WE “belong to Christ”? Or are our allegiances placed elsewhere?

Perhaps another way to prepare for the “Final Life Exam” as we observe the ending of this Church Year and prepare for the beginning of the new Church Year with the First Sunday of Advent next week, is to ask ourselves: Do we share, or do we hoard? Do we care, or do we ignore? Do we reach out, or close ourselves off? Do we love others, or do we focus just on ourselves?

If we profess that Jesus is the Lord of our lives, and if we truly “belong to Christ” as St. Paul defines it, then we will naturally be mindful of the circumstances of all those who live in the human family. We certainly can’t feed, clothe or visit every hungry, naked or imprisoned person in the world; but we can pray for them, be concerned for them, work for solutions to change the conditions that cause those situations and to bring about more just, and equitable, circumstances for all people everywhere.

While the current political climate becomes more and more polarized, and the government seems paralyzed and unable to accomplish anything, with many people suffering as a result, God continues to urge us to follow His Plan. And God’s Plan for equity, justice, and mercy for all people, if followed, is guaranteed to be successful. And what is His plan? First of all: that He sent His Son to show us how unconditionally we are loved, and to win for us our salvation. Then, the Plan is for us, following Jesus’ example, to care for one another. Our giving food and drink to the hungry and thirsty is God’s way of assuring that everyone’s needs are met. Our welcoming the stranger is God’s Plan to provide security for all. Our providing clothing for the naked and caring for the sick is God’s Plan for meeting needs right in our midst. And visiting those in prison, in person or through programs that are restorative, is God’s way to provide for the betterment of society.

As we end this Church Year, we need to remember this simple truth: anything loving, kind and charitable that we do for others, when it is done because we try to see Christ in them, is of “eternal” value. What we do, or fail to do, for the least of Jesus’, and our, brothers and sisters, that is what we do, or don’t do, for Jesus---and for our eternal salvation. The love of Christ, Who has laid down His life for His Sheep, must become the measure of our generous and saving love for others.

Yes, our lives are filled with “new beginnings” and “various endings”. But today, we celebrate Jesus Christ, the “Alpha and the Omega”---the Beginning AND the End---the King of the Universe. May each and every one of us continue to reach out in loving, Christ-like service to those in need. In doing so, we will be truly acclaiming that Jesus Christ, the King of my heart, is Lord of All!

God bless you now and always!