

SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE “A”  
NOVEMBER 25/26, 2017

What do you give a priest as a gift at Christmas? Recently friends of mine happened upon a novel idea. Visiting friends out of state they visited their hosts' sheep farm. Repairs were being made to the boards surrounding the sheep pens. My friends hit on the novel idea of asking for a small piece of one of the boards being replaced so that, "Father can rub this on his clothes and have the smell of the sheep" as Pope Francis says. The only problem was how to get this sheep smell infused board through the TSA screening at the airport. In the end, they abandoned their idea, good as they thought it was.

This weekend brings another liturgical year to a close with the feast of Christ the King. This feast points us to the day when earthly time will cease, and the Kingdom of God begun in Jesus is revealed in its fullness.

Yet, the setting is not a throne room in an earthly palace. The setting is a sheep pen. While Jesus speaks of his coming and being seated upon a glorious throne, the imagery immediately shifts to that of a shepherd separating sheep from goats. Ezekiel in the first reading, like the prophet Malachi of a few Sunday's ago, rails against the religious leaders of Israel. Israel's kings and religious leaders were to model their exercise of authority on David, the shepherd king, chosen by God in caring for those entrusted to them especially the most destitute. This they failed to do, instead modeling themselves on earthly kings, and in the case of the religious authorities, creating a comfortable caste life for themselves laying heavy burdens on those subject to them. Through his life, and ultimately, his death and resurrection, St. Paul reminds us that Jesus has fulfilled what Israel's priests and kings failed to model. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, is the Shepherd King.

Those in the Church called and entrusted with the pastoral care of its members as priests are, as the pope has stated, to have the "smell of the sheep." The Holy Father has been very direct in stating that bishops and priests are not called or to become bureaucrats, "paper pushers", but are to invest their time and energy in getting to know, name and involve themselves in the real daily lives and struggles of the people entrusted to their stewardship.

On this feast of Christ the King, what Pope Francis in a particular way has called the priests of the Church to embrace, by extension is also applied to each baptized member of the church. Through baptism each of us has been made an “alter Christus” another Christ. Each of us bears the image of Christ and is called to act out of that reality.

We generally apply the words and scene in today’s Gospel to seeing and ministering to Jesus hidden in the guise of the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the stranger, the sick, the prisoner. True enough. Yet another commentary I recently read offered an additional perspective. According to this interpretation, it is not only about seeing Christ in the person of another, especially “the least among us.” It is also about us living out the image of Christ we are. In caring for the “least among us” we reveal Jesus whose body we are. When one of God’s “little ones” encounters us, whose face do they see, whose voice do they hear, whose hands do they feel?

Jesus also states in the parable that it is the “nations” are assembled before him. The judgment is not only directed toward individual believers, but of all of us as members of a corporate body—church and nation. It is common for our elected leaders to speak about us being a “Christian nation” and ending political speeches with “God bless the United States of America”, both noble ideals. So, as a nation when it comes to the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the immigrant and refugee, those lacking adequate access to health care, those in prison--whose face, whose voice, whose hands do they encounter in terms of law and governmental policies? Is it the face of Christ--a “Christian nation”-- or something else? As it the Church, especially in regard to those who feel, or in fact are, excluded due to their marital status or sexual orientation--whose face, whose voice, whose touch do they experience?

How willing are each and all of us to acquire the “smell of the sheep”? Our place in the Kingdom of God depends on our answer.

Perhaps as we make our Christmas gift list we might all request a “sheep board.”

Fr. Jim Secora