

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Our Lord Jesus Christ the King, Nov. 21-22, 2020, Cycle A

I just read about a custom practiced at a Jesuit High School many years ago. The custom was known as "the reading of marks." What would happen is that a whole class would assemble in the auditorium at report card time where the principal read aloud the grades of each student. (Can you imagine that?) The reading was accompanied by some evaluative comments the principal would make, like "Good Work," or "You need to work harder" or even worse. The rationale for this anxiety-producing "the reading of the marks" was that such an exercise was a good preparation for the Last Judgment.

Well, maybe so, and maybe not, but this weekend we reflect on the last judgement scene found in many Jewish writings; and in the New Testament the idea of a Last Judgement had become an article of faith – a Last Judgement where God in a certain sense reads off the marks of each person – vindicating the good and punishing the wicked.

Jesus, though didn't tell his parable of the Last Judgement to scare us into charity or to live justice. Jesus knows that genuine encounters with poor are what enlarge the heart and vision of the one who gives. Jesus is saying, if you really want to know me, then you must be in relationship with my beloved poor.

Jesus makes it quite clear that he is not a King as the world understands a king, but a King of humble service to others. If we want to share his glory, get passing marks so to speak, then we must walk in His humble footsteps of serving the most disadvantaged of our world.

And, we have reason to be concerned, for the criteria Jesus lays out for entrance to God's eternal Kingdom are not the standards our human societies tend to live by. To be honest, we value little the poor, the disposed and the downtrodden. Where we claim the right to throw refugee children into cages, Jesus would have us acknowledge their fleeing for safety and welcome them. Whereas modern societies claim the authority to take children from their homes, because their parents are too poor to afford running water and nothing is done to lower their utility rates, Jesus reminds us that God is the God of the dispossessed. If we become complacent to our systems that create conditions that allow suffering and poverty, Jesus reminds us that the way we treat the victims of any kind of injustice will determine how Jesus the King treats us on the day of judgement.

As King, Jesus also compares himself to be like a shepherd. We remember that Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd. In the ancient Near East the image of shepherd was a powerful metaphor for kingship. The notion of king as shepherd meant the king was more than someone who wielded political or military power. The ancient Near East people had hopes and dreams of kings who would truly try to get to know their flocks intimately, seeking to protect the weak and vulnerable from internal and external threats, even to lay down their lives for their sheep, which Jesus did. Jesus is calling us to walk in his footsteps as the Good Shepherd with the Last Judgement Gospel, to truly care for the suffering, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned.

Those who strive to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, comfort the sick and visit the imprisoned will probably not receive much praise or publicity for what they do in this world – though once in a while a Mother Theresa or Dorothy Day may be recognized. I will guarantee you, though, one will not grow rich or powerful serving the needs of the outcast. Making money and wielding influence are the standards of success in this world, not in God's world.

However, in serving the needs of others, we walk in the footsteps of a true King – a true King because this King's way leads to eternal life. When we hear Jesus the King read off our marks at the Last Judgement and say to us, "well done my good and faithful servant," we will have great reason to rejoice. For Jesus will then invite us: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."