

Christ's Mission and ours

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christ the King Sunday, November 21, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Last week our senior high youth group met at the Broad Street Community center. I heard that the boys chose up sides for basketball and left out the girls. That didn't make the girls very happy. Maybe the guys were afraid the girls would beat them. Well, Jesus tells us that at the last judgment all the nations will be gathered before him and he'll choose two teams. He doesn't separate them according to their race, nationality, financial status, or gender. He separates them on the basis of how they've responded to the least of Christ's family members. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Who are the least of Christ's family? I believe that God has a special love for the homeless, the hungry, the naked, the refugee and the prisoner regardless of their nationality or religion. And all people have a responsibility to minister to these people. But I don't believe that Jesus was referring to poor people in general when he spoke of the "least of these my family members."

Read the Gospel of Matthew and you discover that wherever Jesus uses the word "family member" he's not referring to all people in general. He's referring to his disciples. Jesus assumes his disciples will be poor. In this story the Risen Christ is saying, "My dear hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, and imprisoned brothers and sisters, do you know that you have an immense significance in my Father's plan to save the world. Do you know that the nations of the world will be judged by their

response to you?"

Here's one illustration of what Jesus was saying. Most of us are familiar with the story of the Philippian jailer found in Acts 16. The youth choir presented a performance based on this story several years ago during the morning worship service. Paul and Silas are imprisoned in the city of Philippi for preaching the gospel. At midnight an earthquake shakes the prison and the doors of the cells open. The frightened jailer is about to kill himself because he fears his prisoners have escaped. But just then he realizes that Paul and Silas are still there. He sees them and cries out, "What must I do to be saved?" "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved and your whole household," they say. He believes. He washes their wounds. He brings these strangers into his home and feeds them. He and his entire household are baptized that night. When the Son of Man comes again in glory with the holy angels he will look at the Philippian jailer, his wife and children and say, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was in prison and you visited me. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to Paul and Silas, my brothers, you did it to me." Salvation came to that family because of the way that jailer responded to Christ's brothers imprisoned for their fearless preaching of the gospel.

Jesus has placed us in the world to carry on his ministry. When we follow him faithfully we may very well become hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned for his sake.

When I was in junior high Auca Indians killed five missionaries in the jungles of Ecuador. The story of their martyrdom had a profound effect on my life. My sister

gave me, Jungle Pilot, a biography of Jim Elliot, one of the five missionaries killed. At that time in my life I wanted to be an Air Force pilot like my brother. But when I read the story of Jim Elliot I decided I wanted to be a missionary pilot. I wanted to combine my dream of being a pilot with a desire to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to people who'd never heard of him. I went to Wheaton College because that's where Jim Elliot had gone. My freshman year I lived in Eliot Hall, named after him. Eventually I gave up my dream of becoming a missionary pilot. But one of the things Jim Elliot said has stayed with. He said, "Who would not gladly give up what he cannot keep, in order to gain what he cannot lose." Jim Elliot's passion in life was not to get a good job and make lots of money. His passion in life was to bring the good news of salvation to people who didn't know about Jesus. As it turned out, he was killed in the attempt.

But that's not where the story ends. His wife, Elizabeth, went back to the Ecuadoran jungles and made contact with the men who killed her husband. She lived among the Auca's. She learned their language, ate their food, lived in their thatched huts. She was a stranger and they took her in. As a result, those Auca Indian's received Christ through receiving her.

When we hear the story of the Sheep and the Goats, the primary question it puts to us is not, "What more can I do to help hungry and naked and thirsty and imprisoned people?" That's a good question. But it's a question that presupposes that we intend to remain in control of our wealth. The question the story of the Sheep and Goats puts to us is a far more radical question. It's, "How can I and my

children, members of Christ's family, become poor, hungry and thirsty for the sake of the worlds salvation? Am I willing to allow myself and my children to become imprisoned, like Paul and Silas or like the family of Corrie Ten Boom in World War II. Am I willing to become a stranger like Elizabeth Eliot, so that men and women outside the kingdom might receive Christ?"

Sound extreme? Sound radical? It is! It's not the question we usually put to our children. What parents wants their children to grow up to be hungry, naked, sick, homeless and imprisoned? That's the last thing we want for them. We want them to be successful. As good Americans we want to do all we can to assure that they'll become healthy, wealthy, and respectable.

I certainly want my sons to be successful but that's not what I desire most for them. I want them to be so utterly committed to Christ that they will use their talents and abilities most effectively for Christ and his kingdom so that the world might be saved. If they become doctors, I hope they give a significant portion of their time and energy to healing poor people who can't afford health care and to refuse to perform medical procedures which destroy lives. If they become lawyers, to give a significant amount of their time and energy to defend people who have no one else to defend them and to do this as a Christian, not just as a humanitarian. If they become scientists, to give significant time and energy to research ways for hungry people to be fed. If they become bankers, to become like George Bailey in Frank Capra's movies, It's a Wonderful Life, whose Building and Loan business enables countless townspeople to own their own homes. If they

become politicians, to become like Mr. Smith in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, who fights for what's right and stands up against the powerful even if it means not getting elected again.

But if that's what we want for our sons and daughters, we adults have got to start modeling that kind of life style. They need to see that money, clothing, health, home, and social standing in the community isn't what's most important to us. We must model the kind of behavior that shows our children that we're willing to lose all or even go to jail for the sake of Christ.

This morning six children are going to be adopted into Christ's family. Joanna, Daniel, Galen, Scot, Megan, and Allison will become the newest brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ through the sacrament of baptism. Jesus says that the nations of the world will be judge according to how they receive one of the least of these who are members of Christ's family. Let's teach and nurture these children and all our children from their earliest age that God wants to use them and us to bring Christ to the world. That's the most important goal in life, to bring Christ to the world. It's not to get rich or to be well dressed and have a nice house. There's nothing wrong with those things in themselves but Christians can't make those things our life goals. We're called to bring up these children to offer themselves and all that they have for Christ and Christ's kingdom, risking hunger, thirst, imprisonment, exile so that the world might be saved when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and

the Holy Spirit one God, now and for ever. Amen.