

LAST SUNDAY IN THE CHURCH YEAR - A  
November 22, 2020

"Blessed By The Heavenly Father"  
St. Matthew 25:31-46

Brothers and sisters in Christ;

When there is a baptism the baby or the adult is baptised in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through those words and that little bit of water, he or she becomes a child of God, an heir of eternal life, a little lamb of the Good Shepherd. There is a tendency to think of baptism as a past event. To the extent that it is something that happened at a definitive point in time. But our Baptism is also something that is very much in the present tense. We are baptized in the Triune God. We are God's children. We are forgiven. We are heirs of eternal life in heaven. *"Everyone should look upon his Baptism as his everyday wear, to be worn constantly"* (Luther). And it is something that stays in force forever.

Whether you were baptized last week or 80 years ago, your baptism still makes all the difference for your life today. If we do not understand that, it is because we do not understand the significance of being baptized.

St. Paul tells us the deepest meaning of our baptism when he says: ***"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through Baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."*** Baptism is all about death and resurrection. It is about our dying to sin and all its evil lusts so that the new us can come forth to live in the glory of the new life we have through faith in Jesus Christ; the life we have as forgiven saints, not dying sinners.

Today is the Last Sunday of the Church Year where all the reading focus on the last things, the end of time, when finally what we have been praying about, that "Thy Kingdom Come," does come, and Jesus returns not in Christmas sweetness but in great power and might as King and Judge. And, it could happen today, maybe tomorrow. That is why there is an urgency, that any baby or adult be baptised, because we do not know the day or the hour.

And yet, as hard sounding, and as difficult to hear, and as inappropriate as these reading of today sound, this in reality is what all of our Baptisms is really all about. For through those words and that little bit of water, as tiny as we may have been and so completely unaware of the magnitude of what is happening, we became a child of God, an heir of eternal life, a little lamb of the Good Shepherd. We became a Christian, connected to Jesus, forgiven by Jesus, believing in our Saviour Jesus, looking forward, when this life is over, to living in heaven with Jesus. And here in the readings we are hearing how He is coming back to take us to be with Him in the final judgement of all things.

The reading from the 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew tells us about that Day. When the time comes, Jesus will come down from heaven with "the shout of the archangel and with the trumpet of God." Delight will fill the hearts of the faithful, while others will be filled with fear. "Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left."

Having separated the sheep from the goats Jesus then recounts all of the good done by the sheep and all of the evil done by the goats. As He says, the sheep fed the hungry, they gave a drink to the thirsty and they clothed the naked. Conversely, the goats did none of the same. Consequently, He says to them "depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

While it is clear that there is a definite separation between the sheep and the goats, the holy and the unholy, sin causes the sheep to sometimes fear that they are "bad" sheep, and the goats to assume that they are "good" goats. In other words, the sheep recognize all of the bad things they have done in life and they sometimes fear that those things will be brought up on the Day of Judgment. The goats, on the other hand, assume that every act of theirs with a seeming sense of virtue will be counted to their credit on the Day of Judgment.

In reality, if you look closely at the words you will find that Jesus commends the sheep, that is, He has only good to say to them and about them, nothing contrary. On the other hand, He condemns the goats, having nothing good to say to them or about them.

Somewhere deep down in our very being is this idea that God will judge the world on the last day with sort of a two column ledger system. One column for all the good we have

done and another column for all the bad. As if someone was making a list, checking it twice, going to find out who's naughty and nice. There is this strange notion that as long as the good column is longer than the bad we are okay.

And yet, our thinking could not be farther from the truth. Again, Scripture tells us exactly what the Day of Judgment will be like. Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats solely on the basis of faith. Jesus knows who hear His voice and follow Him and who does not. Goats are goats because they, in this life, denied the grace and mercy of God in Christ. Consequently, they stand before God, naked, as it were, in the fullness of their corruption.

Even every supposed good thing they had done in life is counted as sin against them because they were so proud as to assume that they could impress God. While they hoped there would be that two sided ledger of good and bad, there is only the bad. Everything is known about their life and everything is wrong. They had trusted in themselves and they are found, most decidedly, wanting.

But the sheep are sheep by virtue of their trust in and their dependence on their Saviour Jesus Christ who, throughout life, called them by name and spoke to them through His Word. They are sheep because they hear Him say, "I Baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." And, "Baptism now saves you, the promise is for you and your children." "I have called you by name. You are mine." They are sheep because they hear Him say, "I have loved you unto death, even death on a cross." They are sheep because they hear Him say, "Take and drink, this is My blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." They are sheep because there are few words more meaningful to them than God's Word of absolution. "I forgive you all of your sins!" They are sheep because they have washed in the blood of God's Lamb.

When the sheep, when you, stand before the Lord God on the Day of Judgment He will commend you for the good done throughout your life because He fills your life with good things.

Your life, in other words, is sanctified, made holy through the faith that you have in Jesus Christ. Whether you are feeding the hungry, taking care of your children, working a job and providing for your family, loving your spouse and your children, or, simply being a friend to someone else, He says, "WELL DONE." It's all good because it is done through faith in Jesus Christ.

I can already hear it. Perhaps someone will pull me aside and say, "But, Pastor, what about my sins? What about all those times when I did not feed the hungry, when I did not extend a hand of compassion to someone who needed it? What about those times, I am ashamed to say, when I was angry with God, or, when I failed to thank Him for all of His goodness to me? What about those times when I took His grace for granted, or, when I confessed my sin, and committed the same sin yet again? What about those times? What about those sins?"

Friends, there is an old story about a man by the name of Martin of Tours. As it turns out Martin Luther was named after him. As the legend goes, Martin was at home one day when there came a knock at his door. He answered it, and there was a man standing there who claimed to be Jesus. Martin suspected that the man might actually be the devil, the angel of darkness, who had come to tempt him. Martin decided that he would put the man to the test. So, he asked him, what sin is it that most often grips me that I have had to confess to you over and over again? Without hesitation the man at the door said, "I do not remember!" "I do not remember!" At which time, Martin welcomed His Lord into his home.

On that final great and magnificent Day, when the Lord Jesus Christ in all His power and might comes as King, and Ruler, and Judge, and all the nations are gathered before Him, and He judges separating the sheep from the goats, and your name is called and you step forward to be judged. The Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will not remember your sins. He will merely speak the words that He has been speaking to you through His Church all along, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

So today, and everyday, we give thanks eternally to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for Baptism. For in those few words and drops of water all our sins are washed away in the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and we are a child of God and an heir of eternal life. Amen.