

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**O**pen a bible, light a candle beside it, and pray together the following section of Sunday's responsorial psalm.

**ALL: The Holy One is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want.**

**1:** You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes.

**ALL: There is nothing I shall want.**

**2:** You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

**ALL: There is nothing I shall want.**

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY



Mural/Dorothy Day Center, St. Paul, MN

**T**he Church year culminates this Sunday and holds up Jesus Christ as the King and model leader of the human race. In Sunday's gospel Jesus, the Son of Man, sits on a throne, the ultimate judge of the nations. Acting in the pastoral role of a shepherd, the king separates the sheep from the goats in his flock. He separates them on the basis of a single imperative: how they have treated the least. This king identifies not with the highest or grandest but with the least.

We have spent 2020 with Matthew's gospel, the most Jewish of the four gospels. Early in Matthew's narrative on a hill in Galilee Jesus insists that

he has not come to abolish the law of Moses and the prophets but to fulfill the law (5.17).

In the gospels this fall Jesus teaches in the temple in Jerusalem, confronting its authorities and teachers. Jesus chastises Pharisees for teaching the law but not living it—for hypocrisy. He sees the whole law summarized in two commandments—to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

**N**ovember Sundays bring gospel readings from Matthew 25, the last chapter before Jesus' passion. The chapter is apocalyptic; it envisions the end when Jesus returns. The

five wise girls who await the bridegroom caution us to keep our lamps full of oil, full of hope and love. The three servants who care for their masters' wealth teach us to use and multiply our gifts from God.

This Sunday the works of mercy challenge all of us to upset social boundaries and care for the least among us. Matthew's whole gospel calls Christians to integrity, not only observing the law but inviting the law to transform us and our world into a community of justice and healing.

● **What from the Sunday gospels of October and November sticks in your mind?**

# GOSPEL

## What you do for the least, you do for me.



**NARRATOR:** Jesus spoke to his disciples.

**JESUS:** When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, he will sit upon his royal throne, and all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The sheep he will place at his right hand, and the goats at his left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand:

**KING:** Come, you that are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.

**JESUS:** Then the just will ask:

**JUST:** Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or see you thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you were a stranger and welcome you or naked

and give you clothing? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?

**KING:** I assure you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

**JESUS:** Then the king will speak to those at his left.

**KING:** You that are accursed, depart from me into that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels! I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me; naked and you did not give me clothing. I was sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

**UNJUST:** Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or away from home or naked or ill or in prison and did not take care of you?

**KING:** Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. These will go into eternal punishment but the just into eternal life.

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus in need and did or didn't help him. Either compassionate seeing or hard-hearted blindness has become so much a part of them that it's a saving or damning way of life.

Jesus identifies with even the least among us. In becoming one of us, God's Son identifies with all of us. How we treat the least among us becomes the measure of how we treat God's Son. This theology reiterates the two great commandments that make love of God and love of neighbor inseparable. It is also the scriptural root of the Catholic social teaching to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

Matthew places this parable immediately before Jesus' passion in the flow of the gospel narrative. In his passion Jesus himself becomes the least among us, suffering the kind of execution aimed to shame and subdue rebellious slaves. Sunday's parable invites us to recognize Jesus in all those who suffer.

● In whom that you know and see do you recognize Jesus suffering?

● Who in your area needs the active mercy of people in your parish?

● In what sense is every day a judgment day?

## What do the works of mercy ask of us?

What makes being judged on the works of mercy so scary is that any of us can do them but we often neglect them. Four times the parable of the sheep and goats repeats the six actions which God requires of the just, drumming these simple, basic

expectations into our heads. To us who hear this parable, the repetition makes the demands of mercy very clear.

However, in the parable neither the just who inherit God's kingdom nor the unjust whom the Son of Man condemns know when they saw



**Get on the Bus is a program that takes children to visit their mothers in prison. A mom wearing inmate blue enjoys her daughter.**

**T**his judgment we fear is personal, but the gospel scene is global. The Son of Man gathers the nations before him. The kingdom Jesus envisions is one of kinship and mercy. We pray this kingdom comes in the Our Father.

In his book *Jesus Before Christianity*, South African theologian Albert Nolan writes that for Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, “‘The Kingdom of God’ meant a state of affairs on earth, when the poor would no longer be poor, the hungry would be satisfied, and the oppressed would no longer be miserable.”

The gospel calls us to decide which side we are on. Will we serve or ignore the least among us? Will we work for a kingdom of compassion and solidarity or live in the merciless fire of injustice and oppression?

Jesus died without seeing the kingdom of God realized on earth. But the opportunity

for God’s will to be done on earth remains to this day.

Why wait? Now is the time to act with mercy and alleviate injustice and poverty. Jesus, who died trying to spread faith in the kingdom, speaks in this gospel, inviting us, urging us, begging us, and gifting us with intelligence, foresight and courage to choose compassion and serve the least of his sisters and brothers. This is the message of Pope Francis—to return to the gospel, to stand with the poor and oppressed, and to wake up to the injustices in our economic systems.

● **What priorities would you set for our Catholic Church in light of today’s Gospel? What would you have the Church start doing that it is not doing and what current activities or programs would you discontinue?**

**E**nabling the coming of God’s kingdom is not work any one of us can do alone. If we accept Jesus’ invitation, we also need to join with others who have developed healing systems that help many.



**John Hengel’s work in collecting food for his parish food shelf in Phoenix grew into Feeding America, a national organization that receives corporate donations and moves them to local pantries.**



**Elaine Roulet’s children’s center at Bedford Hills women’s prison where mothers who give birth in prison can keep their babies with them grew into Providence Houses to support women and their children in making a new life after their release.**

The vision of Sunday’s gospel calls us to respond to the least among us not just as individuals but as a community that identifies with those suffering need. Together we can work to change systemic injustices and make public policy responsive to the needs of people who are poor. Together we can sustain commitments in the face of people’s continuing needs.

One way for faith-sharing groups to enter public life is to join the efforts of a national organization. For example, Bread for the World (bread.org) researches the causes of hunger, advocates legislation to end hunger, and works with churches to lobby their representatives in Congress.

Churches participate through making offerings of letters. The bread.org website





**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

has an online way to write legislators. Bread for the World also reports on global hunger and advocates aid to end it.

- What systemic injustices do Christian groups need to work together to change in your area?
- What organizations in your parish or community work for social justice? What groups can use your talents?



## God will restore Israel.

Sunday's gospel parable of final judgment reworks Ezekiel's Old Testament vision of God as a shepherd who will gather together again the exiled people of Israel. Ezekiel went into exile with his people in the early 500s

B.C. He became one of the scattered sheep who was taken far from Israel to Babylon, which is modern Iraq.

God's infinite and personal compassion is the theme of this reading as of the Gospel. In his mission Jesus shows that God, whom he calls Abba (Daddy), loves and cares about people, especially those who were suffering. He urges us to abandon hatred, oppression, and exploitation and live like God with compassion for all.

## God will shepherd justly.

Thus says the Holy One: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so will I seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

I myself will tend my sheep; I will make them lie down, says the Holy One. The lost I will seek; the strayed I will bring back; the injured I will bind up; the weak I will strengthen. But the fat and strong I will destroy. I will tend them with justice.

As for you, my sheep, says the Holy One, I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats.

Ezekiel 34.11-12,15-17

- What does Ezekiel's ancient vision ask of us today in regard to refugees and immigrants?

## PRAY

Create a litany of mercy to conclude your reflection on the Sunday scriptures. Name people, those well-known or known to you, who do works of mercy and say briefly what they do. Use a litany form such as this:

*Dorothy Day, who offered hospitality to the homeless.*

Respond to each name:

**ALL:** What we do to the least among us, we do to Jesus.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of *Sunday by Sunday*, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

CHARITY

JUSTICE

## DO SOMETHING

- In California the Get on the Bus program takes children to visit their parents in prison. [getonthebus.us](http://getonthebus.us)
- Explore all Catholic Relief Services does abroad at [CRS.org](http://CRS.org).

## Family Advent Tree

Download this coloring activity from our website—[goodgroundpress.com](http://goodgroundpress.com)—and make Advent a holy time.

