

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Feast of the Majesty of Christ, Cycle A – November 20, 2011

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Reflects on **Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17;**
1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Matthew 25:31-46

In the first reading from Ezekiel, God speaks as a gentle shepherd. What exactly is it about a shepherd that tells us we are in safe hands? A shepherd works outdoors, in God's refreshing and life-renewing environment. A shepherd works with somewhat small and goodhearted animals, the kind we might find in petting zoos. There were sheep in the Nativity story, there to warm the babe. And then listen to the words God uses to describe a shepherd's care for his flock. The shepherd tends, rescues, gives them rest, searches for the lost, cares for the injured and sick.

Yes, we are cared for by a gentle shepherd.

And then comes Matthew with the god of my youth – the god who looked over my shoulder as I peeked inside the desk next to me and inside my head I heard, “God sees you.” In the gospel we see a harsh, judgmental god, sitting on a royal throne in heaven. This god doesn't tend the animals; this god separates the animals. The good guys (the sheep), on the right, and the bad guys (the goats) on the left.

But let's leave those regal images, good sheep/bad goat, judging, separating – leave all that with the imagery which spoke to ancient Israel. Our god of the 21st century is the loving, gracious, forgiving god, the god of all creation, and of the liturgical vocabulary of the Church of the Beatitudes. However it's presented, the message in Ezekiel and Matthew is the same. Acting in love is the path to eternal life. God showers us with love. Matthew's gospel asks us to become shepherds, to show our love for God through simple acts of love “for the least of our brothers and sisters.” What we do to help our brothers and sisters, we do to God.

We need to become something of Biblical literalists when we read of Jesus' admonitions to clothe the naked, give food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, visit the sick and imprisoned, and welcome the stranger. These are all contemporary and certainly real social justice issues. They need our compassion and they need our action. When researching the phrasing —what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters, one is overwhelmed with the universality of the message. What we do for the least among us becomes “random acts of kindness,” “works of mercy,” “pay it forward,” “deeds of loving kindness,” and “The Golden Rule.” And there's Karen Armstrong's project with religious leaders from every faith and from around the globe, Joan Chittister and Desmond Tutu among them. The group's task was to look for a common denominator within all belief systems. Pondering this challenge, they produced a document called the Charter for Compassion. They came to the conclusion that it is human compassion that forms the common ground that lies at the heart of all religious and ethical belief systems. And it lies at the heart of what God asks us to do. Armstrong reminds us, “Compassion manifests itself in the world not by thinking but by doing.”

So we go about the business of compassion, which may lead us to places unexpected.

When we feed the hungry, also care for the Earth which provides our sustenance. Sink your hands into the soil of God's creation.

When we give drink to the thirsty, also go up into the snow one winter day and taste of the sweet source of our water that provides life to all of God's creation.

When we hear someone emotionally bare himself by speaking his truth in public, only to be met with silence and blank faces, clothe his embarrassment in that awkward moment with a few words of acknowledgment.

When we see those who are imprisoned by an addiction, a family secret, fear, or failure that keeps them from moving ahead in life, we can be God's love so that those behind their bars will see that God will hold them up until they can do it for themselves.

When we welcome the stranger, also reach out to that estranged family member, knowing that you are both beloved in God's eyes.

I didn't know how to conclude this homily, so I put my pen down, leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. After a few minutes I sat

up, reached for my pen, wrote down four words, and closed my eyes again. Later, coming back to reality, I looked down. Those four words had not come from me. They directed me. I had written:

“Remember who you are.”

“Remember who you are.”

Well, like all of you, I have many roles, but, also like all of you, I am here at the Church of the Beatitudes. That brought me to looking at our Mission Statement - and there it was. After the introductory sentence, we say that we are:

“Rooted in the values of compassion, peace, and justice as taught by Jesus the Christ ...”

We are the people of compassion and *we* are the gentle shepherds.

Amen!