

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

**Homily for the Feast of the Cosmic Christ**  
November 24, 2017 (Year A)

**Anne Goodrich Heck**

God's justice calls us to tend the sheep.  
Ezek 34:11-12, 15-17; Col 1:15-20; Mt. 25:31-46

**W**hat a change in tone from Thursday! First Thanksgiving, and then the threat of eternal fire! I wonder how often this holiday weekend coincides with the last day of our church year. The liturgical year was not planned around American holidays, so strange things happen! On the other hand, gorging on turkey and rich foods on Thursday, and going on a shopping frenzy on “black Friday,” might well call for the reminder in today's gospel that we have some responsibility toward the poor and hungry among us!

This last day of our church year is officially called the Feast of Christ the King, but we are calling it the feast of the Cosmic Christ. It is not just that the word “king” is too gender-specific and undemocratic; more importantly, it is also too small for our understanding of the vastness of our world. It is the Cosmic Christ who assures us that our lives have meaning on this tiny speck of earth in a universe billions of years old, because God loves us! Christ is our overarching hope—which gives us the courage to go forward—and our underlying support—because in him we experience the love of God.

Ancient Christians also knew that the word “king” was inadequate to express who Christ is. His “kingdom,” as Jesus told Pilate, was not of this world—it is on an entirely different plane. Christ is our alpha and omega, as the Book of Revelation sums it up. And the words of today's epistle to the Colossians greatly expanded on this notion:

*In Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created . . . All things hold together in Christ . . . All things [will] be reconciled to God through Christ—everything in heaven and everything on earth.*

November is a time of remembering, which leads naturally to its also being a time of assessing, of reckoning. We start the month with All Saints, and then All Souls, and we carry the personal

memories of loved ones in the book we lay on the altar each Sunday. On the national level we have Veterans Day, recalling the sacrifices war entails—both the heroism and the tragedy, the folly of war. Then comes Thanksgiving, when we commemorate the pilgrims' part in creating this nation. Remembering those who went before us, with all their struggles and sacrifices, their hopes and their dreams, leads us to reflect on where we came from and where we are going in this vast universe, and how we will meet the challenges of our time.

This feast day of the Cosmic Christ gives us some interesting readings, born of hard times centuries ago. For many of us, this year has been difficult, personally and nationally. Our society has suffered very deep and polarizing divisions that threaten our very sense of ourselves as a nation: What has happened to our historical openness to newcomers? Why are we dismantling programs that were created to improve people's lives and protect our environment? Have our values changed? What is becoming of us? But the situation was much worse when today's readings were written down.

Ezekiel has already been living in exile in Babylon for ten years, along with the young king of Israel, the queen mother, the leading advisors and officials, and the important temple priests. They are hostages of the King of Babylon, who keeps them to ensure the loyal behavior of the regent (the king's uncle). Unfortunately, new men who came to power in Jerusalem when the top layer was shaved off have proved to be unworthy. Jeremiah warned that they were greedy and power-hungry; they were also blinded by a complacent faith that because they had the temple, God was on their side. These venal and incompetent fools staged a revolt, and Babylon sent in its army. Ezekiel has just heard the consequences. Babylonian troops have retaken Jerusalem after a long siege. They tore down the city's walls, executed the re-

maining heirs to the throne of David, looted and razed the temple, and burnt the city to the ground. It must have looked like our recent news footage of Aleppo or Raqqa.

Before this disaster, the exiles in Babylon had a hope of someday going home; now there is nothing left to go home to. They have experienced a massive institutional failure, both religious and civil. Of course they wondered: Has God abandoned us? This is the context in which the word of God comes to Ezekiel:

*I myself will look after and tend my sheep (in place of your venal, incompetent rulers)  
I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered. I myself will pasture my sheep, I myself will give them rest.*

(Note the poignant reference to Psalm 23, the psalm of the shepherd king, David!)

*The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back,*

*The injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal.*

Now God will be their shepherd—which is what true leaders do: they “smell of the sheep.”

And then there is that last phrase, which Jesus will pick up on in Matthew’s gospel: *As for my sheep, I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats.* Yes, someone was responsible for those institutional failures! There has to be a reckoning; there has to be accountability for our stewardship. Judgment is really about justice!

Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community had deep roots in Jerusalem’s traditions, and Ezekiel’s experience must have had deep resonance for them. They, too, were grieving a big loss of their time—the destruction of their heritage, the second temple, which had eventually been rebuilt on the same spot as the first. Jesus himself lived and died before this second disaster (70 AD), but he did predict it, and for essentially the same reasons that Jeremiah warned of: corrupt, power-hungry leadership of both church (or temple) and state. Civil and religious institutions were once again failing the people, and there would be a reckoning, which is what Jesus’ parable is about.

Jesus continues the thread about the shepherd and the flock that started with David’s Psalm 23 and was taken up by Ezekiel. But he refashioned his words and images for the realities of his own time. For one thing, he brought it down to the personal level: *I was hungry and you fed me . . .*

*thirsty and you gave me to drink.* That’s what Ezekiel said God would do when others shirked their duty: *I will pasture my sheep* (recalling the green pastures and still waters of Psalm 23). Jesus also has other issues to address: welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, bringing comfort to the sick, looking out for the welfare of those in prison—tasks that his disciples, and later Matthew’s community, would have found at their doorstep.

So, what is at our doorstep? Looking around this church on Quilt Sunday makes me think: “I felt cold and alone, and you gave me a quilt to warm and comfort me.” Ezekiel’s and Jesus’s list of what the leaders of God’s people should do is not exhaustive, but it points the way: All public leadership, civil and religious, is for the good of all, especially those who are most hurting and in need.

Are our institutions failing us in significant ways? What can we, in our democratic society, do, both to provide direct aid for those who fall through the cracks, and to press for policies and programs that meet their needs. This evening’s gospel passage is absolutely on target and has been cited a lot recently, as our national leaders discuss the budget, tax reform. Our bishops recently declared the House’s tax reform bill unacceptable.

Our task of caring for our world and its people lies before us. But we, who hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, and hope to be among those sheep who are “blessed of my Abba God” also have much to be grateful for: The example of Pope Francis, who hosted a meal for 4,000 poor people in Vatican institutions last weekend; our own Catholic Church of the Beatitudes and sister churches, temples, and mosques who take seriously the responsibility of feeding, warming, and healing the poor; our latter-day prophets who speak out in defense of the vulnerable; and legislators and public officials who truly seek to include the poor, sick, and marginalized.

To sum up, it remains for us to live up to the prayer we recite in today’s worship aid:

Christ of the Cosmos,

You are the love in whom we believe,

the wisdom in whom we trust,

and the compassion that calls us to justice.