

Sermon by the Rector
Sunday of Christ the King
November 20, 2011

Readings

[Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24](#)

[Psalm 100](#)

[Ephesians 1:15-23](#)

[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

Today's collect says it is God's will to "restore all things" in Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The dream of restoration has always charmed and haunted the human race. It represents life as it should be, perhaps as it once was: a peaceable kingdom, where all creatures live in harmony. Today's passage from Ephesians evokes a realm "far above all rule and power and authority and dominion," where the hope of restoration shall be realized.

But the resonant language of Ephesians doesn't quite address our yearning. The world it seeks to portray lies too far above and beyond not only all rule and power, but the limits of our own imagination. It feels purely spiritual. We want a restoration we can recognize, touch, taste - something of this earth and of our own flesh and blood.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, more than any other faith, has made the dream of restoration concrete. This tradition begins, after all, in a garden, with two human beings living in peace with each other and with the natural bounty and beauty that surrounds them. Whether it's mythical or real almost doesn't matter. It represents the way things were supposed to be "In the beginning", and on this earth, which is our home. Deep within us lies the longing for its restoration.

The theme of earthly restoration recurs throughout the Biblical history, and Christian history more generally. Revelation promises a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, a new Eden, as it were, before the Lord takes us to the unearthly city where the streets are paved with pure gold. And at the top of Dante's Purgatory (in Dante's medieval geography, a real mountain in the southern hemisphere) we reach the Earthly Paradise – Eden – where the purified souls linger to "glimpse earth's own true loveliness once more," before ascending to the purely spiritual realm of paradise.

Over the dream of restoration, though, and over all of its representations and evocations, broods a vexing – maybe the vexing – question: "What happened? Why aren't things now as they once were, or as they were created to be? What scattered us from the earthly paradise, where all things were in order?"

Perhaps some of you have read, or read about, a book that's gotten lots of "buzz" lately. Written by a New Yorker reporter, it chronicles his discovery of, and enchantment with, a lengthy work by the ancient Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius: "On the Nature of Things". This philosophical epic evinces a strikingly modern outlook. Lucretius sees the

universe as comprised of atoms, particles which come together and break apart. Their movements, not God's will or plan or even human intention, account for all gatherings and all scatterings. Blind forces governing atomic movement dictate how and when life forms grow and decay, and societies and civilizations rise and crumble.

Lucretius's world view has a certain austere power. We sense it in some of Albert Camus's writings, which find a kind of melancholy satisfaction in the fleeting nature of earth's beauties, and their utter lack of meaning.

But in the Judeo-Christian view, it's not the random movement of atoms that brings an end to Eden and scatters its denizens. It's sin that does this.

Today's reading from Ezekiel tells us how this happens. The fat sheep push around the scrawny ones. The strong abuse or exploit the vulnerable, and paradise is lost.

The abuse and exploitation of the vulnerable takes many forms, all of which have a common root.

First, there's overt abuse. We've seen horrific examples of this recently, in the – we still have to say alleged – violations of young boys by an adult male, and the apparent tolerance of his acts by the institution which employed him. A big, fat sheep shouldering, a scrawny one, subjugating and humiliating a child who has no power to resist.

But there are less overt ways of exploiting or abusing the vulnerable, in which almost all of us engage at one time or another.

Sometimes, it's what the prayer book calls "coldness of heart and wanderings of mind." We can't see or fully acknowledge and engage the need that's right in front of our faces because our minds are elsewhere, on our "priorities" or our schedule or our checklist or our agenda: wanderings of mind (a column in the Post last week, by Petula Dvorak, noted how little attention was paid to the long-standing community of homeless people in McPherson Square, in contrast to the extensive coverage of the Occupy movement's encampment there). Or, in that moment at least, we just don't care: coldness of heart. These observations apply not only to our relationship with, for instance, homeless people, but to all of our encounters with need and vulnerability, in whomever they are manifest.

Sometimes, the exploitation of vulnerability consists in the things we do to reveal and rejoice in, if only inwardly, other people's flaws. Modern popular psychology has a term for this: button-pushing. Almost all of us have gotten pretty skilled at this pervasive practice, even if we're usually able to restrain ourselves from engaging in it in an overt or obvious way.

In the last analysis, though, it's our attitude toward our own vulnerability that shapes our treatment of it in others.

In last week's Post, the superb sportswriter and, apparently, halfway-decent theologian Thomas Boswell noted that we all live in mortal fear of one unpredictable moment: when the trajectory of the world's slings and arrows intersects the trajectory of our own hidden and deep-seated flaws, unmasking us, revealing things about us that we're ashamed of. Boswell was writing about Joe Paterno, but his observation has universal application.

We respond to this extreme vulnerability, often, by self-testing, by setting challenges and then striving to meet them, by seeking out trials in order to see if we can bear up well under them. Through this sometimes-obsessive ritual, we purport to reassure ourselves that we're not as vulnerable as we fear we are. That moment of which Boswell writes will never sneak up on us, like a "thief in the night." We'll be ready when it comes, or so well-defended that it never will.

In all of this we resemble the goats of Matthew 25: curious, willful, always demonstrating how well we can handle things.

But the central message of the Bible, including the parable of Jesus that we heard today, is not that God wants us to be good goats, and helps us achieve that goal. The Bible's message is this: God loves sheep. As my beloved mentor and friend Rev. Rex Bateman liked to say, "When our Lord called us sheep, he was paying us no compliment." True enough. Sheep aren't very bright, they wander into danger, they need protection; challenges, tests and trials vex and defeat them. But the shepherd loves them, knows them each by name, sleeps in the door of the sheepfold so he'll detect the presence of the wolf before it gets to the sheep.

I've thought a great deal lately about this phrase from the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation..." Note what it does not say: it does not say "strengthen us to resist temptation," or to meet challenges, or to bear up under trials. It asks God not to lead us into these things in the first place. It's a sheep's prayer, not a goat's.

We need goats, and we need the goat in ourselves: curious, willful, seeking challenge, testing, even temptation, to see if we can overcome it. But this way also leads, sometimes imperceptibly, to the abuse and exploitation, or at least the neglect, of the vulnerable. Remember that it's the sheep who give the hungry something to eat and the thirsty something to drink, who clothe the naked and visit the imprisoned, without even knowing on whose behalf or in whose service they act. They're sheep, after all – not too curious – but they are, Jesus says, the "blessed of my Father."

So, back to restoration. Most of us doubt Revelation's teaching about the thousand-year-reign of Christ on earth. We've discovered that there's no Mount of Purgatory, topped by the Earthly Paradise, in the Southern hemisphere. Still, we'd like to see at least a small, fleeting Eden from time to time, a place of this earth and of our own flesh and blood where we can see how things were meant to be In the Beginning.

At Grace's Table yesterday, we discussed the passage from Ezekiel read earlier this morning. It says that the good shepherd will let his sheep "lie down", meaning "rest", undisturbed and unmolested. This is a living issue for the homeless friends who gather in our Parish Hall every Saturday. One of them, Sandra, said, "We always sleep with one eye open." But another, Bill, said that sometimes at least, "We sleep close together and we watch out for each other. I can sleep because somebody else is probably awake and they'll let me know if there's danger."

| This is hardly [Eden](#). It's the concrete under the E St. Expressway. But it's sheep, utterly aware of their own vulnerability and that of others. It represents, in the smallest, mustard-seed kind of way, a restoration that is of this earth. We have yearned for such since the beginning of time. As we learn to identify a little more with the sheep and a little less with the goats, we might see these kinds of restorations more often.