

**Sermon for the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost,
November 26, 2017**

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A, Proper 29: Ezekiel 34:11–17; Psalm 95:1–7; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28;
Matthew 25:31–46*

The story of the adult Jesus begins with his baptism, his encounter with the devil in the wilderness, and then with Jesus going out alone to preach, “Change your mind, for the sovereign power of the heavens is at hand.”¹

As he walks by the sea, he encounters a pair of brothers, Simon and Andrew. He calls, and they follow. He sees another pair, James and John. He calls, and they follow.

Matthew then tells us that, “[Jesus] went about all Galilee, teaching . . . preaching . . . healing . . . his fame spread . . . And great crowds followed him.”²

The real action in Matthew begins when Jesus sits on a mountain and gives the first, and longest, of five sermons in this gospel. That sermon begins with the

¹ Matthew 4:17. My translation here and where indicated.

² Matthew 4:23–25.

words, “Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the sovereign power of the heavens.”³ Today’s gospel is the conclusion of Jesus’ fifth and final sermon—usually called “The Great Judgment.” It’s only found in Matthew.

Jesus has been in Jerusalem. It is now the evening of the second day. He’s outside the city with his disciples. He will reenter the city for the Passover. He will leave after the supper and be taken back that same night by those sent to arrest him. He will leave one more time: to be crucified.

Like other powerful words of the New Testament, today’s gospel can be, and has been, heard in different ways since the first Christians began to teach and write about it. But let’s start with what Matthew tells us about Emmanuel, about, “God with us.”⁴

First, the adult Emmanuel was a person without a home.⁵ He and his disciples knew hunger.⁶ In Matthew, Jesus returned only once to Nazareth, and

³ Matthew 5:3.

⁴ Matthew 1:23.

⁵ Matthew 8:20.

⁶ Matthew 4:2; 12:1; 21:18.

found that there, he was a stranger.⁷ After being condemned, Jesus would know much worse than being thirsty and in prison.⁸

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples and to the crowd, “If you love those who love you, what reward have you? . . . And if you only welcome your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?”⁹

Most of us have probably heard today’s gospel lesson preached with what scholars call “The Universal Interpretation,” that is, Jesus speaking about how all people should treat all other people.¹⁰ Pretty much that’s the way in which I’ve preached it over the years. But that interpretation is a latecomer to Christian preaching.

Swiss New Testament scholar Ulrich Luz writes that it only began to be “important in the early nineteenth century.”¹¹ (I suspect this interpretation may have

⁷ Matthew 13:54–58.

⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 283.

⁹ Matthew 5:46–47. My translation.

¹⁰ Luz, 267–71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

made a powerful contribution to preaching the abolition of slavery, here and in England—something to be on the outlook for.)

“The Classic Interpretation” sees Jesus’ sisters and brothers being fellow Christians. His teaching is that Christians will be judged by how they treat other Christians. Professor Luz’s references to this line of thinking begin with Clement of Alexandria who died around the year 215.¹²

In the eighteenth century, scholars began what might be called the modern study of the Bible. They paid careful attention to the use of the words. For our purposes, when Jesus speaks of “all the nations” being gathered before him, they realized that whenever the Greek word translated as nations occurred in other places in Matthew, it was taken to mean “Gentiles.” So they argued it should be taken to mean Gentiles in this passage as well, to refer just to non-Jews. And so, “The Exclusive Interpretation” emerges—it’s about how non-Christians will be judged for how they treated Christians.

¹² Ibid.

I don't think it's possible, or helpful, to choose among the three—universal, classic Christian, or non-Christian. Each gives an insight into the world of Matthew—and it was a fragile Christian world in which Matthew came to know and to live the Good News. Jerusalem and its walls and temple were in ruins. Jewish Christians were largely rejected by their religious leaders and their non-Christian families. Hunger was not uncommon for most people, especially those living on the edges of society.¹³ I think Matthew worried about the persecution he and others suffered at the hands of non-Christians. I think he worried about his fellow Christians falling away from the Good News. And I think he worried from the beginning about how he and others could love those who did not love them.

For myself, count me among the “universalists.” When Jesus was told that his mother and brothers were waiting to see him, he replied, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father . . . is my brother, and sister, and mother.”¹⁴

¹³ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 11–14; Andrew Brian McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 267–70.

¹⁴ Matthew 12:50.

The week before Thanksgiving, I was cutting through Grand Central Terminal. In a quick moment, a much older, shorter woman was in front of me, asking for fifty cents. I wasn't in clericals. I didn't stop right away, but I did—maybe ten paces later when I realized there was a five-dollar bill in my wallet that should be hers. I turned and tried to find her, but she was gone. I can always think about today's gospel lesson. Then I began thinking that if my mind had settled immediately on one or both of the twenties in my wallet, I would have found her. I know I'm not the only person in this room who gets this wrong—and who knows when I have been wrong. I hope and trust there will be mercy for me when God remembers the times when I have tried without thinking or worrying, and from my heart, to do what God has asked me to do.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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