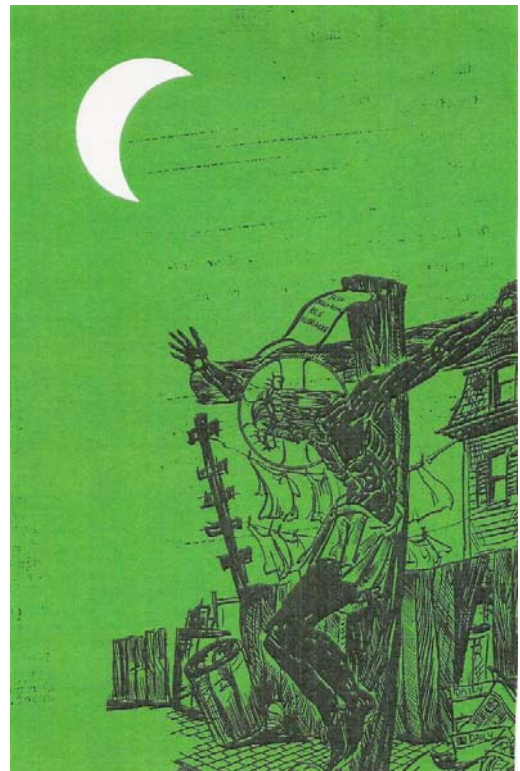


# INDIFFERENCE

November 20, 2005

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr.

Back in the mid-1960s, when I was the Vicar of two mission Churches in Gloucester County, I used to get the Sunday service leaflets from the Diocese of Chicago. The inside pages were blank of course and the cover usually had some artwork and on the back was an inspirational message written by someone in Chicago. I remember quite vividly one of those bulletins and out of the four years of bulletins there, it's the only one I saved. I saved it because of the cover. It was done in dark green and black, with a crescent moon in the upper left. It was a street scene....a back alley in the slums with all of its litter and neglect. In the foreground was Jesus Christ, amid the trash cans and week old newspapers,



completely alone, crucified on a broken-off telephone pole.

I often think of that scene and the attitude it illustrates, perhaps more especially when I encounter the Gospel passage

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I just read....the sheep and the goats. It's as though when we ignore God, when we ignore his people and their needs, when we ignore the *primacy of love* proclaimed so clearly in the Gospels....it's as though we are literally hanging Jesus out to dry on a telephone pole.

The parable in the Gospel for (this evening) (today) parallels those of the past two Sundays. Two weeks ago the reading was about the foolish maidens and their empty lamps. Last week we discussed how the servant with one talent failed to grasp the opportunity to make more for his Master than what was given to him. And (this evening) (today) we hear that both the sheep and the goats failed to realize that during their lifetimes they were being judged by how they responded to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner.....all those fellow human beings whom they could notice, or not notice, whom they could love and serve, or about whom they could remain totally indifferent. *We didn't know, Lord*, they cried, and Jesus answered, in effect, *Well, you know now!*

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In all three Gospel readings, there is a common thread: it is the tragedy of the missed opportunity, the tragedy of love losing out to its opposite, not hate, but indifference. It is the tragedy of failing to see the Christ in everyone we meet.

When we really get into this parable, there are at least two points to consider: the first is how do we see the king, and second, what do we do when we see him?

The king divides the sheep and the goats on the basis of whether they recognized him, either by accident or design, and in the way they had served each other in daily life. I think we might agree that if the king showed up in dress blues, spit-shined shoes, with medals and sword, we would easily recognize him and act accordingly. The facts of life are that we don't see the king in everyday situations because we are not looking for him there.

We meet Christ wherever we find people. The struggle with meaninglessness, which so many people carry on against

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heavy odds, day after day, demands open heartedness on the part of others if there is any help for them at all. The struggle demands real concern, and if the concern *is* real, it must be unlimited....unlimited by disaffection or contempt, unlimited by the fear of inconvenience or expense.

That brings us to the question of what are we supposed to do when we see the king. The sheep were praised and the goats were indicted according to the way they had met the needs of others for food and clothing, etc. How about us? The ultimate criterion by which we are judged is love....faith in action....just doing what needs doing, not to be righteous, not to get into heaven, just doing small unremembered and unremarkable acts of kindness and love, acts done only because there were needs to be met. The goats on the other hand, were indifferent; they turned their backs. They may have had faith, but having faith is not enough; it's the doing faith that counts.

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How do we as a Parish measure up? One look at our web site will tell you that Grace Church is involved in numerous forms of outreach ministries behind the scenes. It might surprise you how many there are.

How do we as individuals measure up? Frankly, I don't honestly know. However, I do know that we become numbered among the sheep when we recognize people as persons and the recognition of personhood involves a sensitivity to the deeper needs which everyone has for forgiveness and love. This reading from Matthew says that there is such a thing as accountability....a responsibility to be a loving servant of Christ Jesus, a servant who identifies with the fragile, the neglected and the needy. If we acknowledge that our purpose in living involves creative relationships in the name of God with everyone we encounter along life's way, then we have recognized Him, for this is the vision of Christ. His subjects will consist of those who ministered to him in his guise of loneliness.

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I began with an image, which saw Jesus crucified on a telephone pole. I want to close with another, poetic, image of a neglected, ignored, forgotten Christ. One of the most remarkable priests in the Church of England in the 1920s was a man named G. A. Studdert-Kennedy. In WW I he was a much loved Army chaplain. The troops called him *Woodbine Willy*, because he had a habit of passing out New Testaments with one hand and Woodbine cigarettes with the other. In the peace that followed, he was also much loved, still called “Woodbine Willy” by the men he had served (long after the Bishops thought he shouldn’t be called that); he was a mesmerizing preacher who lived true to the Gospel, always giving of himself, his own clothing, money and food. Sad to say, he died in March 1929 at the age of 46. He was also a prolific author and poet, and wrote these lines, titled *Indifference*:

“When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged him on a tree,  
they drove great nails through hands and feet,  
and made a Calvary;  
they crowned him with a crown of thorns,  
red were his wounds and deep,  
for those were crude and cruel days and human flesh was cheap.

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When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed him by,  
they never hurt a hair of him,  
they only let him die;  
for men had grown more tender,  
and they would not give him pain,  
they only just passed down the street,  
and left him in the rain.

Still, Jesus cried “forgive them,”  
for they know not what they do,  
and still it rained the wintry rain that drenched him through and through;  
the crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,  
and Jesus crouched against the wall and cried for Calvary.”

**AMEN.**