Homily for Sunday, November 22, 2026



It may come as a shock to you, because it certainly did to me, that belief in the afterlife, only came into our Jewish ancestors' consciousness about 200 years before the birth of Jesus. Jesus has arguments with the Sadducees in the gospels because they had no belief in the afterlife, resurrection, angels, or the immortality of the soul, stuff that we tend to take for granted. In fact, they made fun of people who did. But forget about the Sadducees for a moment; they were probably idiots anyway.

Like I said, when Jesus came onto the scene, the idea of an afterlife was only around for no more than 200 years. Many people in Jesus' time still didn't believe in an afterlife, in resurrection. We nod in agreement at the words of Jesus when he said, ***"I am the Resurrection and the Life"***. But that was a huge learning curve for many people even in Jesus' time.

Going back to the Old Testament (which represent ¾ of our entire Bible) are stories of people who did not believe in life after death. It's hard for us to acknowledge that Abraham, our "father in faith," along with his wife Sarah, did not believe in an afterlife. Their descendants, including Moses, the great prophets (even the ones who predicted the coming of Jesus), the author of the Psalms, none of these people believed in an afterlife. Yet they were passionate for God and salvation. But the afterlife was not the main motivation for their passion. It wasn't about earning sufficient Brownie points so that God would like them enough to guarantee them a spot in heaven.

While I firmly believe in life after death, much of the Church's history--and even its theology--unfortunately centered, almost exclusively, around the promise of heaven and the threat of hell. Many people, mostly conservative Christians, still have as their main operating system, their primary motivation you might say, the promise of heaven and the threat of hell hanging over them.

The gospel passage we just heard, about the Son of Man separating the good sheep from the bad goats at the end of time was used not only by parents to keep their children in line, but also by priests, bishops and even popes. Because we were all children at one time, threats and fear, do work in the short time, to get us to do homework, to do chores at home, or to "go to Church" on Sunday. However, for adults, they are very poor replacements for a loving and lasting relationship with God and neighbour.

One of the things I love about this story of the sheep and the goats is the shocking response of both groups. Those who did feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc. are completely caught off guard when the king admits to them that when they did these wonderful things to others, they were simultaneously doing it not just *for* their king but *to* their king. Their response is shock. ***"Lord, when did we ever see you hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or imprisoned?"*** Like the Old Testament prophets, they did these things because they were the right thing to do without any regard of some future reward in some future life. Those who didn't respond to the hungry, thirsty, naked and imprisoned are equally shocked when they find out that neglecting those in need was the same thing as neglecting their king. The response of this second group is the exact same words as the first group, ***"Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or in prison and did not take care of you?"*** And, of course, you know the king's answer: "When you failed to respond to people in their needs, you failed to respond to me."

These people are condemned. I would say that by their lack of actions, their sins of "omission," they condemned themselves. It's almost as if they are saying, "It's your fault, Lord, that we didn't respond to you. If you hadn't disguised yourself in the hungry and thirsty, the naked, sick, and imprisoned, we would have had a better chance at responding positively to you. How were we to know that you were "hiding" so cleverly in these people? So, you see Lord, it's your fault." There's always someone to blame for our inaction. To put it another way, it's easy to love Jesus in the tabernacle; he doesn't say to much. I can control the dialogue, the expectations, and I can even whittle God down to a manageable size. However, what's not always easy to love is not God in the abstractions of my mind, but God in the concreteness of human flesh. Love has to be love in the concrete otherwise it's not love. To love this son, this daughter who is making no headway in overcoming their drug addiction, is to love in the concrete. To love this spouse, who's doing little to grow in this marriage, is to love in the concrete. To love these particular parishioners, who are contributing little to their own spiritual growth and little to the life of the parish, is to love in the concrete.

Notice how concrete, how down-to-earth this gospel gets. It starts off with this wonderful Last Judgment scene where, in some celestial realm, angels are surrounding God who sits upon a throne in glory. Wow, what a scene! Then all of a sudden, it become very realistic, very concrete. God has become incarnate. And here you feel the shock of the Incarnation. This is the shock of Christmas. People expected and longed for a warrior god who would come from heaven, perhaps even on a golden chariot, to liberate them from worldly shackles, especially from the pagan Romans. Instead, they got the Incarnation. No throne. No chariot. They got instead one who was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned; they got a vulnerable baby who could provide nothing for himself if we first didn't provide it.

Besides the shock that our Old Testament ancestors didn't believe in the afterlife but had a tremendous passion for God, and besides the shock that our mighty God descends from a throne and lives among us as a needy and marginalize person, is the third shock that often hits me in unexpected ways. It's the shock of random acts of kindness. When you're at the bottom, you don't even expect someone to reach out to you, in this dog-eat-dog world we live in. But when it does happen, it's like heaven has broken through to earth.

Fr. Greg Boyle, has been running for over the past 35 years something called Homeboy Industries. Homeboy Industries, out of California, is the largest gang intervention, rehab and re-entry program in the world. Here's a story he shares. ***Martha has had a tough life. Abandoned, tortured and abused as a child, she, predictably, transmitted her pain, long before she got around to transforming it. Gangs, drugs, and prison filled nearly two decades of her life. And she carries that particular heartbreaking pain of, in her addiction, giving birth and having the child taken away and raised by strangers. She works for me and is solid in her recovery now. But the shame and disgrace, the principal suffering of the poor, still weighs heavily. We talk in my office one day, about, well, stuff and she begins to sob. She folds her arms on the front of my desk and rests her weary, weeping head there. I touch her shoulder and ask, "Why are you crying?" She looks up and blurts, "I wish you were God." This makes me chuckle, "Why?" When Martha can form her words through her sobbing, she says, "I think…you'd let me into heaven." Now it's my turn to cry. I reached across the expanse of my desk, and I grab both of her hands and pull her in close. "Kiddo, I swear to you…if I get to heaven and you're not there…I'm not staying."***

It is the Feast of Christ the King, but *kingship* makes Jesus yawn. Now, *kinship*…that's another story.

Fr. Phil