

## MEATFARE SUNDAY (Matthew 25:31-46) Sunday of the Last Judgment

This Gospel is read on the second Sunday before the Great Lent, also called Meat Fare Sunday or Sunday of the Last Judgement. That is the Sunday when we stop eating meat, and remind ourselves that God who immensely loves people has also to come as the Judge. During His first arrival He came as a servant. His second arrival is going to be completely different. This time He is arriving in His glory, with all the holy angels with Him, and He will sit on the throne of His glory. **«All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.»** As we can see here, the whole of humanity is going to be judged and divided into two groups. **«And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.»** Sheep were always regarded as a symbol of obedience and meekness. They always loyally follow their shepherd and they are easily kept together as a flock. The sheep represent righteous people who follow Christ as their own Shepherd. In the Gospel according to St. John Christ reveals his role as «sheep shepherd». He says: «the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.» (John 10:3-4). «His voice» was heard and followed by righteous people who spoke the words spoken by Christ – The Holy Gospel. On Judgement Day it will be not difficult for Him to separate those who followed Him from those who didn't. Jesus perfectly knows every single man: «I am the good shepherd; and I know my sheep, and am known by My own» John 10:14. An especially important statement for our understanding of this Gospel is the following claim: «There will be one flock and one shepherd.» This refers to Christ as the head of the church. «And He is the head of the body, the church..» (Colossians 1:18). The Church is the community of faithful people who follow Christ and His Gospel. Symbolically, «sheep» who follow the «shepherd and his voice».

He will say to those those on His right hand **«blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.»** These are people who fulfilled God's calling to become children of God through Jesus Christ (Galatians 4:4-7), because inheritance is given only to children. This verse also proves that humans are created and destined for eternity, but they have to choose the life that leads to eternity by their own free will. The following words of Christ show the standard of His judgement. **«For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.»** The righteous people couldn't understand these words and asked when did that happened. The Lord answers: **«Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.»** The standard of judgement is our mercy towards others. The needs listed by Christ includes both physical and spiritual needs. Those who are hungry and thirsty, are not only those in need of food and water to sustain their physical bodies, but also those whose soul is hungry and thirsty for God. The *Superficial meaning* is: we have to be able to recognize Christ in every single person and to serve Him by serving them. *Deeper meaning* is : by quenching hunger and thirst of our Christ-like soul, we give food and drink to Christ who is within us.

By referring to Himself as «The Son of Man» at the beginning of this Gospel, Christ wants to emphasise the likeness between God and man. Man is created in the image and likeness of God. (Genesis 1:26). This is crucially important since we are invited to recognize Christ in every single man without exceptions. God is within every man through his immortal soul which is the icon of the Living God. In order to see and serve Christ in other people, in the first place, we have to see and feed Christ who is within us. Jesus reveals what is His food: «My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.» (John 4:34). Jesus is doing the will of the Father by fulfilling His plan for salvation of the humanity. What does this mean for us? How do we feed Christ who is within ourselves? The answer is very simple: by fighting for our salvation and trying to become Christlike, in other words trying to become children of God. Love towards Christ will make our true

love towards other people possible. We should recognize the icon of Christ in every single man, and accept every man as a being dedicated for eternity. That will enable us to accept other people as our brothers and sisters, and consequently, we will begin to care not only about their physical well-being but also about their spiritual well-being. To see Christ in everyone is the fulfillment of the great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself ( Matthew 22:39).

Our mercy towards other people must be unconditional, because by serving others we serve Christ. That is why love towards God is not only the main christian virtue, but also the source of all other virtues. True mercy, as every other virtue has to lead to eternity. If we fail to see ourselves as beings created for eternity, and neglect to look after our soul properly, as the image and likeness of God within us, then Christ within us will be hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and in prison. Furthermore, failing to see Christ within ourselves, will prevent us from seeing Christ in other people. We'll not be able to attain eternal life, and will be condemned not by God but by ourselves personally, because God gave us a chance but we decided not to take it. That is exactly what'll happened during the Last Judgement to the «goats» on His left side. Christ uses goats to illustrate the unrighteous for they do not follow the shepherd, they are territorial and hot-headed. It is more difficult for a shepherd to keep goats together as a flock than sheep. If we don't accept Christ as our Shepherd and don't become a member of His flock – Church, because we would rather follow our own desires, we will be separated on His left side. Then the words of Christ will follow: «Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.»

Man by his own free will puts a curse on himself, because he will end up in the place which is not prepared for humans, but for the devil and his angels. This Gospel reminds us about two paths a human can follow: the first one is *with Christ* that leads to life everlasting, and the second one is *without Christ* that leads to eternal death. On the Last Judgement what will be taken into account is not only what we did, but also what we failed to do during our earthly lives. In order to fulfill God's request for mercy, our faith requires works. «Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.» James 2:17. «Faith by itself» or faith alone without works does not save. The Apostle James is very clear about that in his epistle: **«But someone will say, « You have faith and I have works.» Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe - and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?»** (James 2: 18 – 20) Accepting that God exists is not enough, because even the demons know that God exists, but will not be saved.

During Great lent we abstain from certain types of food which is a great effort and in a way also a sacrifice. This gospel reminds us that the mercy we give to others will be the mercy we will receive on the Last Judgement. If we show no mercy, our faith and even our sacrifices to God including fasting will be of little use to us . « For judgement is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgement.» James 2:13. If we give help to « one of the least of these» who are poor, hungry, thirsty, sick, suffering, in prison or simply rejected and forgotten by this world, we are not only helping Christ, but in reality we are becoming «conformed to the image of His Son».(Romans 8:29). The oldest preserved icon in the world, from the sixth century, kept in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mt.Sinai, in Egypt, depicts our Lord Jesus Christ as Pantocrator. This icon is unique because it represents the two faces of Christ. On the left side of the icon Jesus is in the act of blessing with His right hand. That side of His face is calm and serene, because it represents Christ in His role as a Merciful Saviour. On the right side of the icon, He hold the Gospel, His features are hard and severe, because that side represents Christ as a Judge who sees all. He will judge the whole world according to His Gospel