

Nineteenth Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Wis 18:6-9 Heb 11:1-2, 8-19
Ps 33 Lk 12:32-48

The little flock and the kingdom

In the arrangement of readings during Ordinary Time, the Old Testament first reading and the gospel are coordinated, and it is usually quite easy to see how they are related, while the second reading, taken from the letters of the New Testament, is read serially, without any attempt to coordinate the readings. But this Sunday, providentially perhaps, it seems that the second reading from Hebrews and the gospel passage contain similar themes, at least if you scratch beneath the surface and make connections.

In the gospel, Jesus speaks to his disciples, calling them a “little flock,” an expression used nowhere else in the gospels, and tells them, encouragingly, that their Father is pleased to give them “the kingdom.” In preparation for receiving the kingdom, they are to sell their belongings, and from the proceeds they are to give alms, meaning they are to give to the poor. By this, they will build for themselves treasure in heaven, and their hearts will follow their treasure. This is how our hearts work ... where our treasure is, there are our hearts.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the author is reflecting theologically on the story of Abraham from the book of Genesis. Abraham and his wife Sarah were the first of the little flock chosen by God to become the Hebrew people, the children of Israel. They were extremely few

in number, until Jacob was born of Abraham's son, Isaac, and the sons of Jacob became the twelve tribes of Israel. What God pledged to Abraham became known as the Promised Land, a country flowing with milk and honey, where they would inhabit cities already built and tend to flocks and fields and vineyards already there, worked and ready and abundant. In this new "homeland," though, as it is called, they lived as if they were "strangers and aliens," for they knew, by faith, that God was promising them something more, something beyond this earth and this life, "a better homeland, a heavenly one." God had "prepared a city for them."

A heavenly homeland. A holy city (Rev 21:2). A kingdom. None of them of this earth. All of them of God, by God, from God.

Who is this little flock? What is this kingdom?

First the little flock. Little doesn't necessarily mean few in number. Little is a diminutive, the little ones. They are the biblical *anawim*, referring to the oppressed and forgotten, the trampled upon and the disregarded, the poor, the meek, the humble, who because of their poverty, meekness, and humility are blessed by the Lord. They are like little lambs, innocent, defenseless, without guile or pretense of power. The little flock finds delight in living out the commandments of the Lord, in ordering their lives around God's righteousness. They have learned, through suffering and hardship, to trust in God alone and not in human promises or power. Because they have nothing for themselves, God himself becomes their portion and their inheritance. They are in his hands and do not

rebel. And the little flock is comprised not just of the children of Israel, but they are drawn from “every tribe and tongue, people and nation” to use a refrain found over and over again in the book of Revelation (e.g., 5:9; 7:9).

And the kingdom? It is not like the kingdoms of the world. It does not belong to his world (Jn 18:36). The kingdom, which is in and of heaven, can be received only by those who are its rightful heirs, those to whom the “Father is pleased to give” the kingdom. It is an eternal and universal kingdom – forever, “of his kingdom there will be no end,” and for all and all-encompassing – a kingdom of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace. The kingdom is not built by human hands, cannot be built by human hands, which reminds us that the kingdom is not of this world, or in this world, not in the institutions we build, not in the countries we create, not in the systems we set up.

The Lord Jesus himself, we are told in the book of Revelation (1:6; 5:10), makes the little flock, his Father’s *anawim*, into a kingdom, a kingdom of priests for his God and Father, and they will reign on earth, in the new heavens and new earth first foretold by Isaiah (65:17; 66:22) and seen in mystical vision by John in Revelation (21:1). The little flock, ignored and trampled upon by the powerful of the world, themselves become an everlasting kingdom while the kingdoms of the world crumble and fall and fade into oblivion.

What does this mean for us, who live in these troubled times, when the autocrats who rule the kingdoms of the world are invading or

threatening to invade neighboring countries, persecuting with ethnic war their declared and historic enemies, running roughshod over the institutions of government that promote democratic decency and stability? What does this mean for us, who in these troubled times are witness, once again, to the rise of predatory oligarchs who build unimaginable fortunes by plundering public treasuries, who purchase political influence so as to write laws and regulations that benefit them, whose vast resources allow them to privatize what was once held as public and common goods?

It means this: it is time for us to sort out where we stand, whether we are of the little flock or not. If I stand on the side of those with power, with the affluent and the influential, with the strong and the strident, then I am not of the flock. Jesus's words promising a kingdom were meant for the little flock – the *anawim*. Very few among those in positions of power and prestige (in Jesus's day or in any day) become his disciples, even if they are “officially religious.” The priests, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the scribes and scholars of the law all scorned and rejected him. They set their hopes on a political Israel, which was kingdom of the world, and that kingdom was brutally crushed. A few centuries later, when Rome became Christian, the new class of the “officially religious” placed their trust in the power and protection of the empire, which was of the world. And then only a hundred years after adopting Christianity as its official state religion, the Roman empire collapsed.

Put no trust in princes, in mortal men in whom there is no help. When they breathe their last, they return to the earth; on that day their plans come to nothing (Ps 146:3-4).

There are lessons to be learned even here and now about the little flock and the kingdom. Now, dear friends, is the time for the girding of loins and the lighting of lamps, for an unflinching examining of how we conduct our lives so that we can see where our real commitments lie, where our hearts are. For the heart lies always with what it treasures. Do I treasure worldly power and prestige, control and domination, affluence and influence? Or do I treasure kindness and compassion, service and charity, unity and peace? Do I choose the peace of Christ, which the world cannot give (Jn 14:27)? Do I choose the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot receive (Jn 14:17)? Do I choose the kingdom of God, which does not belong to this world? Or do I choose the world?

Do not be afraid, little flock, to sell your belongings, to give up your worldly allegiances, to forsake the power and prestige that is the world's coin and treasure, but which, on the last day will be revealed as tragically trash. Your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven. Choose well where you place your heart, your loyalty, your trust. You have been entrusted with much – the teachings of Jesus himself, the words of everlasting life – much more, then, will be demanded of you. *Fear not, little flock. Your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.*