

## **Christ the King**

The cycle of the Church year has come full circle once again. Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. At the end of our calendar year at the end of December, it can be helpful to look back at where we have been and see the bigger picture. So it is with our church calendar. Almost one year ago, starting with the season of Advent, we waited for the coming of Jesus. We recalled the stories of Jesus' birth and baptism, for Christmas and Epiphany. We have heard about Jesus' public ministry and teaching. During Lent and though Easter, we recalled the stories of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. At Pentecost, we remembered that the Holy Spirit was given to us, members of Christ's body, the church, and the Spirit still moves and enlivens the church. Then, we moved through the long season that finally brings us to today. This last Sunday of the year is called the feast of Christ the King, and it is the Church's way of ending our year with a big finish, by making this bold proclamation about Jesus. Christ is our King; our loyalty is first and ultimately given to Christ. The collect of the day states it well: Jesus is God's well-beloved son, the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is who we worship. This is who lives and reigns: Jesus Christ, the King.

So, how do we worship this king? How do we, in the words of the collect, live our lives under his most gracious rule? What is it our king is asking us to do? How are we called to live to give honor and obedience to the King who sits enthroned at the right hand of God? What does it mean for us, in our day-to-day life, to say that Jesus Christ is King?

As we reflect on these questions, we need to look very carefully and thoughtfully as to what kind of a king Jesus is. When we think of kings, we often rely on the pictures

that we have gathered from books, or stories, or movies: it is easy to think of noble kings, surrounded by luxurious wealth, full of power and majesty. We have all seen depictions of Jesus like this, wearing robes of rich purple, seated upon a throne of gold, the judge of all, at the center of the heavenly courts, with hosts of shining angels attending him on every side. There is nothing wrong with these particular images of a king, we find these images in scriptures and in history. But when it comes to Christ the king, those kinds of images don't give the full description. For a fuller picture of the Lord as King, we can turn to today's scriptures.

In the lesson from Ezekiel, we are given a description of what God is like. God is the one who judges, yes. But we are also given the comforting message that God is like a shepherd. I am the shepherd, God declares, who searches for the lost and scattered sheep. I will seek them out, says the Lord. I will rescue them from days of clouds and darkness. I will gather them in and feed them with good pasture on the heights of the mountains. I will bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak, and I will be their shepherd.

Jesus must have been familiar with this imagery from Ezekiel. So, when Jesus gives us the great teaching on the final judgment, he tells us that God, the creator, the King of the Universe, is also a like a shepherd. We have this great contrast – the powerful life of the king, and the ordinary, hard-working life of the shepherd. But Jesus reminds us in this passage that these two are one and the same. He says, “For when the Son of Man comes in glory, accompanied by all the angels, seated on his throne of glory, and when all nations are gathered before him for judgment, then the king will be. . . as a shepherd.”

This shepherd and king will call all nations and people to himself. And on that day, he will divide the people, the way a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

between those who will inherit the kingdom, and those who will not. And the judgment, the great divide, will come down to something that just may surprise us. The test? How do we know we are serving the king, and will be welcome to enter the kingdom? Well, Jesus says, it isn't piety, or theology. It isn't how many times a day you prayed. It's not what religion you belong to, or if you used the Book of Common Prayer. It isn't what books you read, or even how often you read the Bible or attend religious services. It was simply this: did you show kindness and mercy to others? Did you feed the hungry, did you offer comfort and compassion, especially to those in need? Jesus makes sure his listeners understand this by repeating this part of the parable four times.

It is interesting to note in this story that no one knew that this is what it was all about. No one knew that this is how this king would judge us on – neither the goats nor the sheep. The goats in this story are not necessarily bad people. They are probably folks who tried hard. They may have even been religious and respectable. If they would see their Lord in need, they probably would have done anything for him. But that's the point: they didn't see him. So, on the day of judgment, they asked, Lord when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or sick or as a stranger? Because they couldn't imagine seeing the great king in the lives of the poor, the hungry, the outcast, sick, and the naked. They couldn't see how their daily life filled with regular and easily ignored people, was inextricably bound with their life of faith. They didn't see that the opportunity to love God and love their neighbor was there in the ordinary people all around them.

The sheep, for their part, are just as surprised; they had not seen that it was the King, either. And so, they asked the same question: Lord, when did we see you hungry, or naked, and in need? But even though they hadn't fully seen their Lord, they did see suffering, and need. They saw prisoners who needed comfort, beggars

who needed help, hungry people who needed food. And seeing these people, they saw fellow children of God, and their faith simply told them this is where they needed to serve. What they did see was the connection between faith and their daily life. They saw the connection between a God who loved them, and how they were called to love one another. They did realize that faith had to be put into practice, by serving God and serving others, even small, simple ways.

And as Jesus points out in this story, not once, but repeatedly - Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family – my brothers and sisters – you did it unto me. The message is clear: it is in serving one another that we are serving the Christ, the King. This is the service our king asks of us. And when we do that, we will be welcomed with open arms into God’s presence. It is there the king tells us, “Thank you, my friend, thank you, for in serving others, you have served and loved me.”

Jesus’ parable shows us the kind of judgment that only a shepherd king could give. Did you seek out the lost the way a good shepherd would? Like the passage from Ezekiel - when you saw others in need, did you feed them and comfort them. Did you heal them and strengthen them? If so, then come, enter into God’s joy, for you are the blessed ones of God.

How encouraging this is, that as we move through life, with all its struggles and challenges, with all our faltering efforts to live more faithfully, that this will be the end of our story. When we come before Christ our King and Shepherd, we will realize that in offering love and peace and justice, we have done what God asked of us. We will be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven.

Sometimes it feels like our small efforts to love and serve one another don't really make that big a difference, that in the vast scheme of things, they don't really add up to that much. But in the kingdom, Jesus reminds us, even these small things count. I believe I have told the story before about the scientist and author, Loren Eisely. Eisely was in the south of France, near the coast, attending a scientific symposium. He woke early one morning and went for a walk on the beach before sunrise. As he moved through the misty dawn he focused on a faint, far away figure. It was a young boy, bending and reaching and flinging his arms. Eisely thought that he must be dancing.

As he came nearer, he realized the boy was not dancing at all. He was bending to sift through the debris left by the night tide, and he was stopping from time to time to pick up a starfish and then, standing, he would throw it back into the sea. He came up to the boy and asked him why he was doing this. The boy replied, "The overnight tide has washed the starfish onto the beach, and they can't return to the sea by themselves. When the sun rises, they will die, and the people come from town to pick them and sell them in the market. And so, I throw them back to the sea so they might live another day."

As the boy explained, Eisely looked around at the vast expanse of beach, stretching out in both directions. Countless starfish littered the shore. The boy's plan seemed hopeless, even ridiculous. He said to the child, "There are more starfish on this beach than you can ever save before the sun is up. Surely you cannot expect to make a difference?" The boy paused for just a moment, bent to pick up a starfish, whirled around and then threw it as far as he could into the water. Turning to the scientist the boy said simply, "I made a difference to that one," and kept moving down the beach.

Eisely experienced the moment as a revelation. It had never occurred to him how important it is for one creature to help another, and how the world could be dramatically altered by the simple actions of one person. The next morning, Eisely awoke early, and again went down to the sea before dawn. There he saw the boy again, and this time he joined him in his efforts, one little starfish at a time. He recounted that he had never felt so alive and connected to God.

As individuals, as a church, and as a society, we have a long way to go in living fully into the ways and love and justice. We sometimes turn away from others, from those who are poor, those who are struggling, the stranger, and those in need. But the powerful and good news of this parable is that whenever we do love and care for one another, Christ is in our midst. Whatever difference for good we can make matters. Our efforts and gifts, however small, can be used by God to bring light to others. When we reach out to others, when we offer compassion, whenever we bring a healing and life to someone, then God rejoices. And we can rejoice, too, knowing the kingdom of heaven is already breaking in and the King, the Christ is with us. Amen.

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Christ the King, Year A

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 • Psalm 100 • Ephesians 1:15-23 • Matthew 25:31-46

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