

Sunday, November 26, 2017
Christ the King
Last Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 29 (Year A)
Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1.15-23; Matthew 25.31-46
St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. We are certainly familiar with the language of kingship as related to Christ. We have just come through Year A of the lectionary, the year centered on Matthew's Gospel. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew uses the imagery of kingship to describe Jesus. We first see this with the coming of the Wise Men following Jesus' birth when they come to Herod in search of "the child who has been born king of the Jews" (Mt 2.2). Then throughout the first Gospel, Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, continually seeks to build the case that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the King that was foretold by the prophets. And all of this imagery of Jesus as King is brought to a conclusion at the end of his life. While on trial before Pontius Pilate, Pilate asks Jesus "are you the King of the Jews?" (Mt 27.11). Following the trial, before his crucifixion, the Roman soldiers mock Jesus, saying "Hail, King of the Jews!" (Mt 27.29). And then as he hangs upon the cross, the unlikely throne for this king, the soldiers place a sign over his head that reads "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Mt 27.37). And lastly, following his resurrection, when the risen Christ comes to his disciples "and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'" (Mt 28.18), whereupon he gives them the Great Commission. The final confirmation that he is indeed the King. Not just king of the Jews, but King of all.

Interestingly enough, despite the scriptural case for Jesus actually being the Messiah, this commemoration of the reign of Christ as King of all Creation is a relatively new celebration in the Church calendar. It is actually a modern concept. It was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to the increasingly secular world and the proliferation of non-Christian empires. This was an attempt by the Church to reinforce the fact that there was a true king who reigns over all Creation – even the secular, non-Christian governments of the world. That this world is indeed not theirs but Christ's. Originally Roman Catholics celebrated Christ the King on the last Sunday in October, to precede the celebration of All Saints Day. But the timing was also meant to counter the Protestant celebration of the Reformation. After the Second Vatican Council, Christ the King was moved to the last Sunday of the liturgical year, emphasizing the eschatological majesty of Christ as we head into Advent, with its themes of the coming of Christ, both at his birth and at the end of the ages.

In an increasingly democratic, or at least, non-monarchical world, many of us, including in this country, have a hard time relating to royal imagery. Maybe particularly here in the United States, having declared independence 241 years ago from the rule of a monarch. So for us, the ramifications of Christ as our king can be difficult to fathom. Nonetheless, royalty is, as one scholar notes, a doorway into a very different worldview. A worldview that we as Christians, by virtue of our profession of faith, must seek to understand more fully.

The readings for today offer a very particular image of what it means for Christ to be King. Of what it means for Christ to be OUR true King. This image is based primarily on those of Ezekiel

and Matthew, with words of encouragement from Ephesians forming the connection to our own place in Christ's kingdom. But there is a warning. While the concept of following a king may be uncomfortable for a people living in a democratic society, being under the reign of this particular king may be, at times, even more uncomfortable.

Our first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. During the time of Ezekiel, God's people are in Exile, which the prophet primarily attributes to the failed leadership of Israel's kings. After the kingships of David and Solomon, Israel's kings prove to be increasingly corrupt. They do not follow the will of God. In the imagery of Ezekiel's prophecy, these kings are bad shepherds. They no longer function as shepherd of God's people, caring for their well-being, but caring solely for their own desires. In light of this, Ezekiel declares that the Lord will, therefore, assume the role of shepherd in Israel. The Lord will set over them a shepherd-messiah, whom God refers to as "my servant David." A messiah, a king, who, like King David, will feed and care for the people. An earthly king, who will embody and carry out God's own will for Israel's protection and nurture. God is promising the restoration of the kingdom. The restoration of a righteous kingdom that will follow God's commandments. In the process, the Lord will search for the lost sheep, gather them together, and bring them back to their own land.

This theme of the care of the people as the hallmark of God's kingdom is reiterated in our Gospel reading. Right down to the symbolism of sheep and goats as images for God's people. In a discourse that is part prophecy and part parable, Jesus talks about his role as king. What we hear today comes from an unlikely context. These words are spoken during his final week. Mere days before his death. Mere days before his resurrection, which will solidify his position as King. A perspective Paul reiterates in his letter to the Ephesians.

In describing the end of the ages "When the Son of Man comes in his glory," Jesus issues a prophesy to his disciples of what is to come. But perhaps more importantly, by putting prophesy in the form of parable, he is offering them some insight into what this will mean for them, not in the age to come at the final judgment, but in the time leading up to it. In the here and how.

In his parable, Jesus uses the image of the people from all nations – Jew and Gentile alike – being separated as sheep and goats are. Despite conjecture, there is nothing significant about sheep and goats. Other than the fact that they were common animals of the day. Animals that lived together under the care of the same herder. The importance is the act of separating them by kind. The sheep on the right and the goats on the left. Separating the herd animals by temperament, and more importantly by behavior and action. Those who cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. And those who did not seek to care for these. In so doing, Jesus notes that those who did care for the least of these were actually caring for him. For we are all the body of Christ. What is done for one of the least of these is done for Christ himself. What is not done for them, is likewise not done for him.

But what is most important is not who did – or did not – do what to whom. What is truly important, what is truly telling, is the reaction of each group. Those who did care for the least of God's beloved children are taken aback. Because they have done these deeds without any expectation of reward or even praise, they are genuinely astonished at the implications of their

actions. “When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?” and so on. They are completely unaware of anything extraordinary about their actions. Why should they have expected any recognition? There is no ulterior motive behind acts of compassion. They are just doing what they are supposed to do as the people of God. To love God by loving their neighbor. To love God by caring for those who are of particular concern to God. It’s just what one does if one truly follows Christ. When Christ lives within us, we naturally perform Christ’s deeds, not our own.

As to those who did not care for the least of these, they too are equally astonished. They had no clue that when they did not feed the hungry, and so on, that they were not caring for the Body of Christ. That they were not caring for their Lord. They bore no dislike or malice toward the hungry, the homeless, the sick, and the prisoners. They just did not recognize the least of these as their responsibility. Somehow, the commandment to love one’s neighbor just did not translate into including those people.

In the parable, neither the sheep nor the goats are apparently aware that during their lifetimes, in their actions – or lack thereof – they were being judged by how they responded to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, and the prisoner. How they responded to all those fellow human beings whom they had opportunity to notice or ignore; whom they had opportunity to love and serve, or about whom they chose to remain indifferent. And we cannot help but ask ourselves, “how do we fare in this judgment?”

Inherent in, and critical to, Jesus’ parable is his identification with the needy and the marginalized. And that it is in this identification that the kingship of Jesus is most fully revealed. Just as God promises to reveal himself in Ezekiel’s prophecy. And it is what we do with that identification, how we choose to live it out in our own lives, that determines our own status as members of Christ’s kingdom. Of what it means for us to follow Christ as our King. Theologian Klyne Snodgrass notes, “The judgment evidenced in this narrative does not ask if a person has accumulated x number of merciful acts but asks ‘What kind of person are you?’ Identity is always the issue. Are you a person characterized by the love and mercy evidenced in Jesus’ kingdom—which is what faith is all about, or are you one characterized by no concern for those in need? Salvation requires such acts. The point is that a person cannot claim the identity without evidencing it in acts of mercy.” (Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 559).

In other words, the parable is intended to lead us away from an unhealthy preoccupation with judgment and toward bold engagement in acts of compassion. That we cannot be a follower of Jesus and lack compassion. For compassion is the very heart of the Gospel. This is not about works-righteousness, which as inheritors of the Protestant movement we do not believe in. Acts of love and mercy are not a means to an end, but are expressions of our intimate knowledge of God’s love in our own lives. An expression that we seek to share with others. It is our part of living into the kingdom of God. In his parable, Jesus is not threatening us. He is merely seeking to remind us of our identity and our calling. He is seeking to inspire compassion as a manifestation of that identity. He is seeking to guide us into a way of life in which compassion is so integral to who we are and what we do, that we don’t even think about it. We just live it.

As to how this relates to Christ as our King, Snodgrass again notes, "The passage focuses on 'the least' for good reason. If people had known the identity of the king, they would have acted differently. Kings are treated nicely; the little people we ignore, which only shows that we act from selfish motives. But compassion has no other motive than meeting a need. It springs from an identity shaped by its Creator." (Snodgrass, p. 562). The parable affirms the continuing presence of Christ the King in our midst. He is not far away in some heavenly kingdom, but is around us every day through those who are in need, through those whom we serve.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul essentially says the same thing a different way. He affirms faith in the ongoing authority of the risen Christ as ruler over everything. As our King. He tells us that we are the saints who receive Christ's Spirit of wisdom. Through the Spirit we are informed, inspired, and guided to put Christ's power to work in our own lives and ministries. That we are indeed the body of Christ on earth. To follow him as our king means, therefore, that we embrace our identity as his subjects and continually seek to carry on his ministry. Not because we have to, but because we want to. Out of love. For our King. And for all his beloved children.