

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Christ the King (Year A)

Matthew 25.31-46

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/294159968519248>

(Sermon begins at about 18:30)

“Serving Christ the King”

Even though we live in a non-monarchical society, we are certainly accustomed to hearing of Jesus Christ referred to in royal language. We hear him referred to as “Lord” on numerous occasions in Scripture. Shortly after his birth, the Magi referred to Jesus as “King of the Jews.” This same title was used mockingly at his crucifixion. We often refer to him as the Prince of Peace, particularly around Christmas time—a reference to a description by the Prophet Isaiah of a future messianic king. And we sometimes refer to Jesus as the “King of Kings.” But emphasis on this royal imagery—and certainly devoting a whole day to the image of Christ as King—is actually a fairly recent occurrence. It all started in 1922 when Pope Pius XI, in his first encyclical, laments that while the hostilities of World War I had ceased, there was no true peace. Pope Pius expressed his concern over the rise of class division along with exploitative consumerism, as well as increased secularism and the rise of nationalism. Considering these developments, the Pope held that true peace could only be found under the Kingship of Christ as the Prince of Peace. As the Pope stated in his encyclical, “For Jesus Christ reigns over the minds of individuals by His teachings, in their hearts by His love, in each one's life by the living according to His law and the imitating of His example.”¹

As far as Pope Pius was concerned, this encyclical was not the end of the issue. Three years later, he issued another encyclical, *Quas primas*, instituting the feast of Christ the King “to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly supremacy.”² Originally designating the Sunday before All Saints Day as the feast of Christ the King, the date was moved to the last Sunday of the liturgical year in 1969.

In establishing the feast of Christ the King, Pope Pius “envisioned a dominion by a King of Peace who came to reconcile all things, who came not to be served, but to serve.”³ An attempt at a social reset that, many would argue, has largely been ignored in actual practice. In fact, one commentator noted that *Quas primas* is “possibly one of the most misunderstood and ignored encyclicals of all time.”⁴

This should be no surprise, given the reactions of those in the parable Jesus tells in today’s Gospel reading. While the basic message Jesus seeks to convey is pretty clear, it is helpful to understand the context. Not to understand the message itself, but to understand the significance, the magnitude, of this message in the canon of Jesus’ teachings. The scene we witness today takes place just a couple of days before Jesus’ Passion. Jesus and his disciples are on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus has been delivering some final teachings to his inner circle—to those who will be charged with carrying on his mission and ministry following his death. This is the final of three parables intended to convey to the disciples what the kingdom

of heaven will be like. The final message he wanted to leave with his disciples is specifically about the judgement that will occur upon Jesus' return—his Second Coming.

He does this through the parable of the sheep and the goats. The bottom line being that the king—referring to Jesus himself—clearly states that those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, or visited the prisoner, have done these things to Jesus himself. And the converse: that those who have not done any of these things have effectively withheld these kindnesses from Jesus.

So, the final message Jesus wants to leave with his disciples is about living a generous, compassionate life. That is certainly in keeping with his emphasis throughout his ministry on the importance of caring for the widowed and the orphaned, caring for those in need and who are marginalized, on loving one's neighbor has self. But here he does it in a way that adds even more importance, a greater significance, to this already all-important message. He places it in the context of kingship. His kingship.

Now, of course, the disciples were familiar with what kings were like. They were familiar with the likes of the emperor, whose forces were oppressing the people as a means of increasing the dominion of the empire. They were familiar with the local puppet kings, like Herod, who were only concerned with amassing wealth and power for themselves at the expense of the people. And now, Jesus uses an image of kingship. "And yet this kingship is something new," as one commentator notes: "Here is a 'king' whose final word is a call to serve the most vulnerable in our communities, 'the least of these.' Here is a regime in which the mark of 'the greatest' is to humbly, genuinely serve 'the least.' Here is a reign that turns conventional kingship, with its pretensions to domination and superiority, upside down: a reign of servanthood and neighborhood, and a community of justice, kindness, and humility, open to all."⁵

Now we need to be careful about what Jesus is really saying here. You could look at the parable and see in it directions for how one is to live a life of faith. That to genuinely be a follower of Jesus, we need to be sure to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit the prisoner. And you would not be wrong in that interpretation. But I think part of what Jesus was getting at by setting up the parable the way he did—if you did these things you did them to me, and if you didn't do these things it was as if you did not do them to me—was to convey something of the inherent attitude one is to have in living a life of faith. Put bluntly, our life of faith is not meant to be transactional. We don't feed the hungry or care for the sick or welcome the stranger to score points with Jesus. We do these things because Jesus cares for "the least," for the marginalized, for those who are in need. And by us helping them, we are helping Jesus in his ministry of love and compassion and mercy. We do these things as a sign of gratitude for what our Lord has done for us. But even more so, we do these things because it is what he would do if he were here. Which he is because we are the Body of Christ in the world.

Admittedly, it's a fine line. A nuanced distinction. Do we do ministry as a transaction or do we do ministry out of genuine love and concern for those who are loved and of concern to our Lord?

I must admit I almost feel guilty even raising the distinction. Because I know that we are not a people that view ministry transactionally. If anything, the past eight months have demonstrated that quite clearly. Since the onslaught of COVID-19 and the necessary changes in operations at St. Gregory's, I have heard a number of you lament that you feel as if your ministries have been taken away from you. Which they have. But not out of any maliciousness on the part of parish leadership or church hierarchy. Ministry opportunities have been "taken way" because we just aren't able to do ministry in the direct, hands-on way that we did before. Ministry opportunities have been "taken away" to protect those of you who are most vulnerable, due to age or underlying medical conditions.

This health crisis has made things difficult for all of us. Because of restrictions imposed by the CDC, the State, the County, the City, and the Diocese, it would have been easy to just give up. It would have been easy to just shut down and wait for the coronavirus to go away before resuming our ministries. But we haven't done that. Because Christ still reigns, even in the midst of a pandemic. Christ is still the king who implores us to care for our sisters and brothers in need. And the reality is, the needs are even greater during this time of pandemic. And we have risen to the challenge. We have found alternative ways to continue doing our ministries.

Our Food Bank continues to operate its monthly food distribution. Getting some of the food we need has been a little difficult due to temporary shortages and some retail outlets placing restrictions on what can be obtained. But we have found other means to get what we need. And we have had to change our operations a little and rely on fewer and younger people to do the work. Ditto for Feed My Lambs. We have, out of necessity, had to change how we do things and what we serve our homeless brothers and sisters at St. Luke's. But it has worked out. God's people are still being fed, clothed, and cared for. And I should note that throughout this crisis, so many of you have stepped up and provided additional financial resources. Thousands of dollars that have helped us obtain needed supplies for both the Food Bank and Feed My Lambs.

Because of logistical issues we had to rethink our annual holiday outreach drives. Normally we would provide Thanksgiving food baskets for about a dozen families. And then we would provide Christmas gifts for those same families through our adopt-a-family outreach program. But recognizing that it may be harder to get some food items this year, and that it is certainly harder and more risky for our parishioners to venture out to do extra shopping, our Outreach Committee, rather than cancelling the project, came up with an alternative. Gift cards. We put out a plea to provide gift card that would then be given to the families so they could purchase what they need by way of food and Christmas gifts. And you stepped up. Thanks to your generosity, we provided the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health with \$6,000 in gift cards to help their clients have Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations that they otherwise would not have had.

And we just finished up the United Thank Offering ingathering. The last few years, we have had good responses, sending an average of about \$1,700 to the national church, which uses the money to provide grants that help support a variety of ministries. Many of which support women and children. This year, thanks to your generosity, we collected just shy of \$3,000. By far, the biggest response we have had! Money that, this year will help provide grants to ministries that have been particularly hard-hit by the COVID-19 crisis.

And all of this is on top of your regular support of the parish—support through your pledges and other offerings. So many churches have suffered during these unprecedented times. But thanks to your generosity, we have been able to fund all our ministries and programs and it's looking like we will end the year in good financial shape. Better positioning us to continue with our mission and ministries in the coming year.

The whole purpose of Christ the King Sunday was to seek to reset and reorient the attitude of the institution of the Church and particularly of her members. To recognize that the prevailing attitudes of the world with emphasis on consumerism, the rise in nationalism, and increased secularism—things that have only become more prevalent in the century since this feast day was established—are not the values that our church is built upon. The purpose of this commemoration of Christ the King is meant to remind us just what our values are. That we serve a king who came not to be served, but to serve. And that in serving the least of our brothers and sisters, we are actually serving Christ.

In the words of Dorothy Day, one of the most significant religious and social activists of the 20th century, if not the entire Christian era: “What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended for them to do . . . We can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing that we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend.”⁶

I think Dorothy Day would see in St. Gregory’s a genuine living into these ideals of Christ the King. And I am confident that our Lord looks at this place and sees in us what he intends for his church. That we are living into what it means to follow and to serve Christ the King.

¹ “Christ the King,” Wikipedia, November 16, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_the_King.

² “Christ the King.”

³ Libby, Howe, “Living by the Word: November 22, RoC, Christian Century, October 26, 2020. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/november-22-roc-matthew-2531-46>.

⁴ “Christ the King.”

⁵ “The Least of These: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Reign of Christ the King Sunday,” SALT, November 17, 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/11/16/the-least-of-these-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-reign-of-christ-the-king-sunday>.

⁶ Dorothy Day, quoted in Plough “Daily Dig” email, November 20, 2020.