

Sunday, November 26, 2023

Christ the King – Proper 29A

Matthew 25.31-46

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/325935670148405>

(Sermon begins at about 25:30)

“Serving Christ the King”

Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. The last Sunday before we begin a new liturgical year with the start of Advent next Sunday. I always find this time between Christ the King Sunday and the First Sunday of Advent a bit of a theological vortex in which we experience an overlapping—even, a redundancy—in themes. What I mean by this is that Christ the King Sunday and the few weeks leading up to it, focuses on the transition from Jesus public life and ministry to his death and resurrection. Specifically, that in those final few days before the crucifixion, Jesus provides instruction to his disciples regarding the end of the ages and the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven, which will be ushered in with his return, with the Second Coming. But then, a week later, we begin Advent, with its focus on the coming of Jesus into our midst, starting with his Second Coming, and then culminating with his birth, with his First Coming, at Christmas—a time warp that is a whole other issue. The result is the ending of one liturgical year and the beginning of the next, looping back on itself. Kind of like a theological Groundhog Day. So, in this theological vortex in which we find ourselves, we spend a good amount of time considering the meaning of Christ’s return and what we are to do while we await that joyous event, whenever that may be. Which must mean that the lessons we are to learn this time year, as we end one liturgical year and begin another, are so important to our lives of faith that they bear repeating.

And, perhaps, some of this has to do with the designation of this day as Christ the King Sunday. A designation that is fairly recent, only having been instituted by Pope Pius XI a mere 98 years ago in response to increasing secularism and ultra-nationalism at the time. A time not unlike the one we find ourselves in currently. The intent of Christ the King Sunday was to remind the faithful that, while living in the secular world, our ultimate authority is not the State, but God. Our ultimate authority is not a president or a king, but rather Christ the King. And that our priorities are to be aligned accordingly. The priorities that are outlined in the readings for the last few weeks and for this day.

In our Gospel reading for today, we hear the final part of Jesus’ discourse with his disciples, his final instructions to them, before the Last Supper and his crucifixion. He has been teaching the disciples and us what they, what we, need to be doing in the uncertain time between his imminent departure—his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension—and his eventual return at the end of the ages. We have heard these final instructions revealed over the last several weeks, with parables emphasizing just how we are to await his return. Not in a passive way, but in an active way. Each parable revealing yet another way in which we are to wait. Each building on the previous, to provide a solid foundation for our lives of faith. To provide a blueprint for how we are to live as the Body of Christ in the world.

Two weeks ago, we heard the parable of the ten bridesmaids, and Jesus' injunction "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Mt 25.13). A reminder that we cannot become complacent in our waiting. Rather, we are to be vigilant as we await his coming. That we are to be mindful and intentional in our waiting, continuing to nurture and care for our own lives of faith so that the light that is the love of Christ continues to burn even as we wait. In so doing, we will not be caught off-guard and will be prepared for the joyful coming of the Messiah when he returns. When he invites us into the banquet of eternal life.

Last week, we heard the parable of the talents, providing us with further guidance as to how we are to await the return of our Master. That he has entrusted us with the work he was engaged in prior to his departure. While not enumerated in the parable, it is implied. That we are entrusted with the work that is the focus of today's parable. The work of feeding the hungry, of satiating those who thirst (be it physically or spiritually), of welcoming the stranger, of giving aid to the poor and impoverished, of healing the sick and infirm, and visiting the prisoner. And I would add, freeing those who are imprisoned unjustly. This is but a partial list of the work that Jesus was engaged in before his death. A partial list of the work that continues in his absence. In preparation for his departure, our Lord entrusted to his disciples, and to us, the resources, the gifts and talents that we will need to continue this work and so much more. The message of last week's parable is that we are to be daring, bold, and courageous in our use of these resources. Helping to advance the kingdom of God little by little as we minister in his name.

And then this week, Jesus finishes his instruction to his followers with one final parable about the coming of the Son of Man at the end of ages. Providing a metaphorical description of the judgment that will occur upon his return. Jesus does this by setting up a model for faithful living vs. unfaithful living. The sheep vs. the goats. This is not just judgment of Israel as God's chosen people. This will be judgment of all nations—of Jews and Gentiles alike. Not that the sheep and goats necessarily represent Jew and Gentile. Rather, these represent those who follow God's commandments and those who do not. Sheep tending to prefer the safety and comfort of the flock—of the community—being more willing to follow the shepherd. Goats, on the other hand, tending to be more independent and wanting to go off and follow their own interests as opposed to that which is for the greater good.

As we heard in the parable, the sheep were those who were concerned with the care and wellbeing of others—with the concerns of the community—while the goats were not. As is made clear through the course of the parable, Jesus identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poor and impoverished, the sick and infirm, and the prisoner. He doesn't just identify with these, but actually reveals himself in an ongoing way through his presence in the lives of these and all those who are marginalized. Today's parable reveals the final piece of the three-part lesson Jesus has been developing through the parables we have heard in recent weeks. That in our attentive waiting for the return of the Messiah, in our bold and courageous use of our talents, we are to seek to cultivate a generous and compassionate life. A life focused on the care of those who are of greatest concern to God and to Christ. Those with whom Jesus himself explicitly identifies.

This generous and compassionate spirit is apparent in that those identified as sheep aren't serving and caring for others with any type of ulterior motive. They are not doing so to curry favor with the king. They are engaging in this generous and compassionate life, performing acts of love and mercy, purely for the sake of love and mercy. Because love and mercy are integral parts of who they are. Because they have experienced God's love and mercy in their own lives, and out of gratitude, wish to share that love and compassion with others. Particularly those who, due to circumstances beyond their control, have not had the opportunity to experience God's love and compassion. Or maybe even any love and compassion.

It may be tempting to view the difference in treatment between the sheep and the goats as a threat to get Jesus' followers to act one way as opposed to another. But that is not Jesus' intention at all. Jesus' intention is not about threatening them, but about instructing them. To help them focus on what is truly important while they await his return. To help this in-between time be a productive time for the advancement of God's kingdom. To focus on that which is of greatest importance and concern to God and to Christ: care for the least of God's children.

No, Jesus does not threaten. If anything, in his parable of the sheep and the goats, he is demonstrating love and compassion for all his children. Especially for those who may have goat-like tendencies. Remember, this is a parable. A story meant to provide a lesson for how we are to live our lives. This is not a proclamation of what will happen. Think the Ghost of Christmas Future in the Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, where Ebenezer Scrooge asks the Ghost, "Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?"

Of course, the Ghost of Christmas Future is not able to speak. It cannot give definitive answers. Only point to what may happen if certain events play out under a particular set of circumstances. Similarly, Jesus is pointing to a potential outcome, not the definitive outcome. In fact, the implication is that Jesus desires all to be able to participate in the kingdom of heaven. Early in the parable, he issues an invitation: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." The implication being that, from the very beginning of creation, this kingdom has been prepared for us. For all of us. It is up to us to respond to the invitation.

If anything, the image in the parable of the king judging between sheep and goats is a means of demonstrating the true nature of God's kingdom. That it is not a kingdom like earthly kingdoms. Not founded for and operating as a means of control and domination, remaining in power through fear and intimidation. Not a kingdom where the citizens spend their lives in service to the powerful. Rather God's kingdom is founded on and operating out of love and compassion. A kingdom characterized by servanthood to one another, particularly those who are most in need. Where citizens spend their lives in service not to self, not in service of the powerful, but in service to and for the benefit of the powerless.

There is no denying we live in a world that is struggling in so many unprecedented ways and facing an uncertain future. And to date, our secular authorities have not been able to rise to the challenge. Perhaps now, more than any, we need to recall the meaning and original intent of the celebration of the Feast of Christ the King. Perhaps now, more than any, we need to be

vigilant; to be bold, daring, and courageous; and model for a hurting world what a generous and compassionate life really looks like. A generous and compassionate life only possible under the leadership of Christ, our true King.