

Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2020

(Mt 25:31-46; Ezek 34:11-16, 20-24; Ps 95:1-7a; Eph 1:15-23)

Today we celebrate *Christ the King* Sunday, the last Sunday of the “church year.” A week from today is the beginning of Advent. Looking back from a year ago today, we’ve followed our Christ (Messiah) through all his days on earth from:

- the first days of preparing for his birth,
- his humble birth in a stable, celebrated by outcast shepherds,
- the coming of the Wise Men (Magi), which we call Epiphany (actually two years after his birth but celebrated twelve days after Christmas),
- the season of Epiphany—the “shining forth,” or revelation, of God himself in human form,
- the baptism of Jesus (because of the secular calendar, there are many years when we celebrate *either* the Epiphany of our Lord *or* his baptism),
- the Transfiguration of our Lord on the mountain, when he was revealed in shining white garb with Moses and Elijah,
- Ash Wednesday (three days after Transfiguration), beginning the season of
- Lent, commemorated rather than celebrated for five weeks until
- Palm/Passion Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey as “King,”
- Maundy Thursday, when Jesus celebrated his Last Supper with his disciples and gave them the gift of the “Eucharist,” (“thanksgiving,”) and washed their feet,
- Good Friday, the day God himself was crucified, died, and was buried,
- EASTER, when the whole world celebrates and PROCLAIMS the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!),
- the season of Easter, seven weeks, which brings us to
- Pentecost (a Jewish festival celebrating the first fruits of their harvest); Pentecost is considered the “birthday of the Church” (which is the body of Christ!) as the disciples in Jerusalem begin to speak in foreign languages so that all visitors in Jerusalem can understand the good news of God in Jesus Christ,
- Holy Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost, when we celebrate One God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
- the “long green season (green altar cloths) of Pentecost, which lasts until
- Reformation (celebrated on the Sunday closest to October 31<sup>st</sup>),
- which is followed by All Saints Sunday,
- and then the final Sundays of the Season of Pentecost. An interesting note: the date for Ash Wednesday is set by the secular calendar, depending on when Easter will be celebrated. If Easter is early, the season of Pentecost will be longer; there are appointed readings for up to 33 Sundays in the season, which ends with
- Christ the King Sunday, which has to be five weeks before Christmas!

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If you've ever wondered why we intermittently celebrate Sundays with odd names, now you know! (Don't worry, there won't be a test!)

But, speaking of tests, there *will* be a judgment! Remember the last two gospel texts. The first was the parable of the ten virgins, five let their lamps go out. When they finally arrived at the place of the wedding banquet, the bridegroom shut the door on them and said, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you." The second was the parable of the talents, where the master gave ten "talents," then five, then one to his servants, who were supposed to multiply them. The man who simply returned the one talent, with no gain, received a brutal sentence: "Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Now read the Gospel according to Matthew, the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter (25:31-46), which follows immediately after the casting out of the servant. Jesus says, ***When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."***

***Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."***

***Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me." They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" He will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*** – This is the gospel of our Lord.

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What does it mean to us, individually and as *the church, the body of Christ*, that Christ is King? In an ideal world, a King or Queen would be a benevolent ruler **of all people**, overseeing a realm where justice, righteousness, and wisdom prevail **for all people**, where basic needs (food, safety, shelter, education, protection, equality before the law and in the eyes of all, medical care, opportunities for growth of body, mind, and spirit) are met **for all people**. Did you know that this model of living together in wholeness and *shalom* is a biblical concept?

Read Acts 4:32-35: ***All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need (Today's New International Version).***

This is hardly a description of what exists now in these “United” States. Chaos, division, rage, self-seeking, casual disregard for individuals in the midst of the pandemic—these are the reality that’s seen by many people here and in other countries. The disparity among our population is almost 50-50, with votes of more than 70,000,000 for each of the presidential candidates. It’s hard to imagine a more divided nation. – Who are the sheep; who are the goats? For whom is “Christ the King”?

The Prophet Ezekiel wrote about God’s care and provision **for all people** who suffer under unjust rulers. ***I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. . . . I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them. . . . I will tend them. . . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice*** (Ezekiel 34:11-16).

There’s a strong message in both Ezekiel and Matthew’s gospel: Judgment will come for all who ignore the weak, shun the poor, turn away from the sick. Judgment will be for what we *have done*, and for what we *have left undone*. We won’t get “brownie points” in heaven for paying taxes, for “going to church” (at least when there’s no COVID), for praying five times a day (like the Pharisees), for throwing \$10, or even \$20, into the red kettle at Christmas time. Yes, those are things that are good; they can be meaningful to the person who does them.

But did you notice that neither Ezekiel nor Jesus said anything about *believing in God*, or *having faith*? There’s no “entrance exam” for you to “get into heaven,” no special words you have to say.

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All that's required is that we be actively attentive to the needs of those who can't provide for their own needs. We are to serve the poor, care for the sick, spend time with shut-ins and with those in any kind of prison (the prison of guilt, shame, drug abuse, poverty, despair, grief, fear, and the physical prisons which hold such a high percentage of our Wisconsin population, including a higher percentage of blacks than whites).

And did you notice there's no condemnation for things like abortion, murder, extortion, sexual orientation, violence? And the King in Jesus' parable doesn't say a word about the need to compile an impressive moral record. What *does* condemn us is our belief that other peoples' problems are none of our concern. It's not so much what we *do* that condemns us, but rather what we *fail* to do.

Remember our Confession when we worship together: Most merciful God, *we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

Do the words of Jesus to the "goats" scare you? ***Then the King will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"*** (25:41). *Judgment* will be real. Those of you who've heard me preach for several years have certainly heard me say that I don't believe in a literal hell. I don't believe that the God I worship would subject *anyone* to eternal torment. I believe instead that parables like this one express just how passionate Jesus is about the last, the least, the little, the lonely, and the lost.

He gets my attention! But I invite you to join me in trusting the words of and about God throughout all of holy history. From the current *Christ in Our Home*, I summarize the reading for Sunday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>: Many people are passionately sure that they know what the Last Judgment will look like; many believe they know who will be saved and who won't. But God came as the Son who gave his life so that the *world* could be saved (John 3:16). So we don't have to wonder if our good deeds outweigh the bad.

In today's gospel the King says to the sheep on his right, ***Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world*** (25:34). *Aren't we all Jesus' sheep?* In Luke's gospel (chapter 15) we read that God's kingdom is like a shepherd who doesn't let even one sheep stay lost. When we care for the "least of these," it turns out that we're caring for Jesus himself. We care for Jesus and the poor and needy not in order to *be* saved, but because we already are! (Alton Hillesland, *Christ in Our Home*, October-November-December, 2020, p. 56).

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Think back to the first page of this sermon, where I listed every festival and “high holy day” of our liturgical year. Here I quote from another beloved source: “This day is a joyous *celebration of a year of reliving the mighty acts of God*. It is also a day of transition to Advent and the great expectation of a Savior who will come to heal, deliver, and save this wounded and broken world. We end the year with hallelujahs filling our hearts. Next week we begin a new year with wonderment, excitement, and anticipation as we prepare once again to explore the mystery, beauty, salvation, and fulfillment found in our mighty Creator, the God of love” (Reuben P. Job, *A Guide to Prayer*, 2013, p. 381).

Christ is the King! God-in-the-flesh died on a cross to reign on high to save every lost soul in the world, including us! Thanks be to God!

*Unfolding Light*, from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, November 18, 2014

***Whatever you did to the least of these you did to me*** (Matthew 25:40)

*This is not a simile.*

*The poor are not an allegory.*

**God** *is the poor.*

*God is not observing them, but **in** them—  
the lonely and the rejected.*

*God takes the lowest place.*

*God is the powerless one,  
the misunderstood one, the crucified one.*

*Under the bridge, in the nursing home, in solitary:*

*This is the throne of the Sovereign,  
the Ruler of the universe: the cross.*

*Until you see the glory of the divine  
in the street gang, the wheelchair,  
the power of the heavens in the lifer,*

*You do not believe.*

*Don't go elsewhere to worship in ease.*

*Bow down, and serve, and know.*