

## **Christ the King, Year A. Matthew 25: 31-46.**

If you ever want to bring something truly new into the world, to say something that has never been said before in the history of humanity, I commend to you the sentence, “The Feast of Christ the King is my favorite Christian holy day.” Now I admit that as I was preparing for this week, I didn’t know enough about the Feast of Christ the King. I grew up as a super-Protestant, and we didn’t wear vestments or adorn the altar or follow the lectionary or celebrate any Christian liturgical day except Easter and Christmas.

So as I was prepping this week, I went to the font of all knowledge—Wikipedia—to learn just what exactly it is that we are celebrating, and why we’re celebrating it. Don’t worry, I eventually found more reputable sources. Today we are celebrating the Feast of Christ the King, which is the last Sunday of the church’s liturgical year—next Sunday a new liturgical year kicks off with the first Sunday of Advent.

So today is a day of transition, from one liturgical year to another, from Ordinary Time to Advent. It is a day of transition, but it is also a feast day. I have already joked that Christ the King is not the most popular Feast Day. This might be because it is so new. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925. In 1925, the pope was upset because so many national governments were establishing themselves as explicitly secular, and the coalescing Italian government wanted control of Rome. And so Pius XI cooked up a plan: let’s institute a Feast Day—a big party—at which we remind all Catholics that the only true king is Jesus, and that national governments are only valid to the extent that they welcome the rule of Jesus (and his right hand man, the pope, of course). We adopted the day in 1970, I think because we didn’t have a better idea for how to mark the end of the liturgical year.

So this Feast Day is explicitly political. It is instituted for political goals, and the spiritual claims it makes have profound political implications. In the official letter that the pope wrote, instituting the feast day, he notes that everyone already thinks that Jesus is metaphorically a king, in our hearts and minds and wills, but that people need to learn that he is also literally the king of life, the universe, and everything. And if we really believe that, then a great deal is going to change.

He is right about this. Certainly, if we give our ultimate allegiance to Jesus, then many things will change, at least for us, but probably also in the public realm. But I’m not sure that the effect would really be what Pius envisioned. I don’t think that the biggest change would be that governments would stop being hostile to the church. The claim our liturgy makes this morning is that Jesus is king. But the question it leaves us with is just what kind of king is this?

Our gospel this morning is very straightforward, but it still has a way of sneaking up on us. Here we are, ending the liturgical year triumphantly, claiming that Jesus is king! Not only is our side right, but we also win! And sure enough, there he is in the text, seated on a throne, being waited on by a host of angels, and judging the nations. All very kingly.

But something strange happens when Christ is king. You show your loyalty to the average king by paying taxes and showing up to fight when he calls. But the tribute Jesus demands is something different entirely. To be loyal to Jesus is to feed the hungry, slake the thirst of the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit

the imprisoned. There is no flag to wave, no literal battle to fight. And the kingdom of Jesus does not have anything to do with paying deference to the church, as Pius seems to have assumed—it is entirely about meeting the needs of the folks.

This text is so straightforward that I don't think we need to dwell on its main point for very long. The kingdom of God is given to those who care for the sick, visit prisoners, welcome the stranger, and so on. Not to the most pious, the most learned, the most successful, but simply to those who care for those in need. It is a progressive Christian's dream text. And I can't help suggesting that we should take it seriously: when we as seekers or confirmed Christians or both are anxious for an encounter with God, we need not go to a sweat lodge or Tibet or a very wise religious leader—we should go help someone, for this text assures us that Jesus is there.

But there is an element of surprise in the story that we should note: and I mean the very fact that the sheep and the goats are surprised themselves. Neither the sheep nor the goats were aware that they were doing or not doing these things to Jesus. Both groups say "Lord, when did we see you . . ." or "If we had noticed you there, we would have . . ." I frequently make the mistake of expecting an encounter with Jesus to be spectacular, to involve a blinding vision, or a profound stillness, or a great miracle.

But Jesus is encountered constantly in the most ordinary, even banal or apparently unpleasant situations. As simple and ordinary as helping someone get dressed, laying out the daily pills, breaking bread together with someone who is hungry. We should know this—we claim every Sunday that Jesus is present when we break bread.

The sheer ordinariness of the kingdom of God makes it more difficult for us to see. The physical, mundane reality of the Incarnation makes it more difficult for us to remember that we believe in it. That lonely stranger, that long ill grandmother, that beggar with the shakes, is Jesus Christ, who is king.

Now, a word about judgment and eternal life. If Jesus is the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the prisoner, then the goats who neglected those folks have already chosen not to be in relationship with Jesus—which is itself the punishment. And the sheep who cared for these folks inherit the kingdom because they have already been living in it, often without even realizing it. Inheriting the kingdom of God is essentially realizing that we have already been choosing to live in it.

So here, at the end of the church year, I think we're called to do two things. First, let's celebrate the work that God has done among us this year. Let's remember that those mundane tasks—organizing the back to work clothes closet, cooking breakfast at PADS, driving a carload of beef to St. Cyprian's Food Pantry, giving someone a ride to a place where they love to be, greeting a stranger as a friend—let's remember that these simple actions are the daily routine of eternal life, the infrastructure of the kingdom of God, messy and surprising encounters with Jesus Christ himself, as surely as communion is the same. And second, let's commit: we'll do it again, we'll do it more, we'll do it more joyfully, giving glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.