

Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

We are living in unusual times. It would be hard to dispute that, but this morning we celebrate Christ the King Sunday and turn our attention not only to the end of the Liturgical year, but to the scripture passages that describe the end of time: Judgment Day. That should give all of us pause. On Christ the King Sunday we celebrate Jesus coming into his own having completed his mission on earth. Next Sunday will begin the four Sundays of the Season of Advent as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth and his entry into the world on Christmas Day.

The backdrop for these occasions in the Christian calendar is anything but ordinary this year. We might say that none of us has ever experienced anything like this before. We find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic which appears to be reaching crescendo heights with hundreds of thousands of deaths and infections. It's an invisible enemy that threatens each and every one of us. The anxiety level individually and collectively is staggering. It is...in a word...overwhelming. Not only are our lives in jeopardy, but we realize that as the virus spreads there are economic consequences to consider as well. The potential domino effect on the economy as businesses close and more and more of us are unemployed is potentially catastrophic. And when we need them the most, the reassurance of the physical presence of our family and friends...the ones we love the most...is severely restricted. For many of us, this isolation becomes a mental health issue as well. And what then happens to our spiritual life? How do we sustain our connection to Christ and to God and to the Holy Spirit in the midst of such turmoil? For many of us, our daily reliance on our faith that embodies that invisible love from the Trinity may be the one thing that keeps us intact as all around us seems to be falling away.

Today we celebrate Christ the King as he comes into his glory. His mission on earth has been completed and now he is seated at the right hand of God in preparation for the judgment of each of us...the judgment of all the people of the world. All the angels are with him as he sits on the throne of his glory. We can imagine that His robe is dazzling white and He will radiate light that makes the sun seem pale. His light will be reflected off the iridescent wings of the angels and it will be a sight never seen before. It will stun all who see Him.

All the peoples of the world will be before him. More people than we have ever seen in one place...more people than we can imagine. This is the time when we will be judged for how we spent our lives...what we did and what we didn't do. As the people come before him...each one individually...he divides them...some to his right because it is with the right hand that the blessing is given and they are the sheep of his flock...and some to his left because they are the goats and not part of his flock. It's an interesting thing about sheep and goats...it's actually pretty hard to tell them apart sometimes when the sheep's wool has been shorn. They look very similar. So, how does Jesus know which is which? Because Jesus can see into the heart of each one...and in this metaphor, that's the distinguishing difference between the sheep and the goats.

In the Old Testament lesson that we heard this morning, the prophet Ezekiel explains to the people of Israel who the sheep of the Lord are. Ancient Israel is being put on notice that it can't count on its favored nation status with God on Judgement Day. The sheep of the Lord are the underdogs...the ones on the margins of society...the ones who are lost or have strayed away. They are the ones who have been scattered. These are the sheep that the Lord will bring out of every nation. Ezekiel says that the Lord will feed them and bind their wounds and strengthen them and take care of them. And the Lord will judge for himself which are the lean sheep and which are the fat sheep. The Lord will deal harshly with the fat sheep who have pushed the weak sheep and butted them and ravaged them. Even in ancient Israel, the prophets were calling out the folks who took advantage of others. They were telling the people that the Lord did not take kindly to those who mistreated others. The Lord's favor fell on those with a good heart and with a sense of justice. It didn't seem to matter so much then...or now...which theories you believed or what rank you had in society. The Lord, it seems, doesn't care if you are successful or even competent. The Lord cares if you have a tender heart and if you take care of those who can't take care of themselves. More so than any other factor, the Lord's judgement rests on how we treat one another. And Jesus can see into every single heart.

Holiness is not about piety. Holiness is not about being liturgically correct although liturgical correctness is good. Holiness is not about how many times a day we pray, although regular daily prayer is a good thing. Jesus instructs us to be in communication with Him and with our Father on a daily, if not hourly, basis. Holiness is not about Biblical knowledge and the ability to quote scripture chapter and verse, although knowledge of the Bible is important if we want to understand God's message to us and God's instructions for how we are to live our lives. Holiness is not about never breaking any laws, although being law-abiding is a good thing. Holiness is not about never having any doubts. Sometimes the spells of doubting and questioning lead to deeper faith. Holiness is not about being the best at the intellectual gymnastics of understanding different aspects of theology. Understanding them often brings us

insight, but insight is not our path to holiness. No. Holiness is not about any of these things. Holiness is not about what we believe. Holiness is about how we behave.

Jesus says to the sheep and the goats: I was hungry and you fed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes. I was in jail and you went to visit me. I was sick and you took care of me. The sheep and the goats have at least one thing in common. Both of them seem surprised by what Jesus is saying. Both of them want to know, “When did we see you naked and clothe you or when did we see you hungry and give you something to eat?” Neither one of them made the connection between what they did or what they didn’t do and how that figured into the way Jesus was dividing them.

Neither the sheep nor the goats saw Jesus in a perilous condition and reached out to him. If they had known it was him, they most certainly would have done something to help. The interesting thing is that the sheep reached out anyway because they had compassion on another human being who was suffering. They didn’t know it was Jesus, they simply acted out of their compassion. They acted from a place of love in their hearts because they knew something about the magnificent love of God for them. They didn’t do it to get in good with God or because they wanted God to think highly of them. They didn’t do it to try to be holy. They did it because another’s suffering touched their hearts and inspired them to act.

The goats also didn’t know it was Jesus, but rather than reaching out to another suffering human, they turned their backs. They not only didn’t see Jesus, they didn’t see the person suffering either because if they had they might have felt compelled to do something about it. Better not to see at all. Better just to walk by or turn the other way or perhaps even to look past the suffering soul or even worse ... to look right through him as if he were invisible.

Jesus talks to us about good trees bearing good fruit. They can’t help it. The fruit is part of the tree. The fruit reflects the quality of the tree. Bad trees can’t bear good fruit; they bear bad fruit because the fruit is part of the tree. Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is a bit like a bad tree trying to bear good fruit. God sees into our hearts and knows how and when we are motivated. Are we doing something out of honest compassion or because we believe it to be the right thing to do OR are we doing it because we know we are supposed to do it or because we are fearful about what will happen to us if we don’t? This passage is not about what we believe. It’s not about our creeds; it’s about our deeds and the motivation behind them.

As we celebrate Christ as King, may we always be mindful of His work within us. May we listen to that still small voice within our hearts calling us to do as Jesus commands. May we see the

world around us and the people in it as Christ himself. And may we be moved to act on our most loving impulses.

In the coming days and weeks and perhaps months, there will probably be many opportunities for each one of us...collectively or individually...to see Jesus walking among us as we become more and more aware of the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. There will be no shortage of people in distress in one way or another. We, ourselves, may be among the ones in distress. But we can rest easy in the knowledge that we are not walking alone. The God who created us and the Son who lived with us and taught us and died for us and the Holy Spirit who dwells within us are walking each step of the way with us. They are the source of strength, of love, of resilience, of creativity, of generosity, of compassion, of care, of resourcefulness and all the other gifts bestowed on us. They will never leave us alone to fend for ourselves.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN