

Christ our King



So here we are at Christ the King Sunday. It's the end of the church year. A herald to the end 2020, this seeming year of apocalypse. Over the last few weeks, Jesus has warned us to prepare for Christ's second coming with the lessons of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, and the trustworthy and lazy slaves. Now he delivers his climatic, final parable: The final judgment. Jesus is a masterful preacher. There is simply no better way to say what he has so clearly told us. Are we sheep, or are we goats? If we've lived the Gospel, if we've loved God by loving our neighbor, welcome home to eternal life. If not, off we go into eternal punishment. End of sermon. Jesus drops the mic, and we exit - hopefully, stage right.

The parable of the final judgment is the guidepost to a certain kind of Christianity. A religion in which we live this life largely motivated by what will happen in next. In this religion, God in Christ is many things, but overshadowing them all, he is a judging king.

The Gospel itself does not place such overarching importance on the final judgment. The real climax to the Good News is Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and his sending us out to bring this good news of salvation to all people, baptizing them in "*the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" (Matthew 28:19)

The desire for a judging king seems to be driven more by the human need for the carrot and stick to help keep us on the straight and narrow. Before all the Old Testament stories about David, Solomon and their many successors, God's chosen people walked without a king. Instead of being subject to a powerful judge, the children of Abraham were in covenant with Yahweh, the Great I AM. More of an awesome liberator and protector than a judge. Who needs a king when you are being led by a pillar of fire (Ex 13:21)?

The Hebrews knew what it was like to be under the boot of pharaoh. They wanted no part in such a system. But the need for order in an imperfect world finally led Israel down the more conventional route of kingship. Good, bad and indifferent, it has been our way ever since.

Like the original chosen people, we strive to be motivated by God's benevolence to love God and love each other. But we also recognize our human need for ordered community. In our better moments, America seeks to be a democratic "*city upon the hill*" (Winthrop), ordered by a system of laws. In religious life, our Anglican tradition values a congregational polity reminiscent of those liberated Hebrews and the early church, balanced by a more authoritarian hierarchy to preserve order and unity.

Whether church or state, inevitably, our sinfulness threatens this fragile balance. We need someone to save us from ourselves. Ezekiel said it well:

Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and

they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. (Ezekiel 34: 20-22)

It's not so much that we are either sheep or goats. We really are all sheep, all one flock. But out of fear, selfishness and pride, some sheep exert a kind of privilege. They fatten up on rich pastures while pushing their weaker, fellow sheep out to the wild edges of the flock, where they grow lean from hunger, cold and illness, easy prey for injustice. Perhaps by suffering out there on the margins, they somehow shelter the fat sheep in the center so they can keep getting fatter. I don't know. What I do know is if this "*pushing with flank and shoulder,*" this "*butting at all the weak animals*" continues, the whole flock will eventually fail.

We know that left to our own foibles, we're in trouble. We need a shepherd to restore order, to bring the flock to a rich wholeness. I think that's why we yearn for a king.

For nearly a century, the church has celebrated this last day of its year as Christ the King Sunday. Pope Pius XI first established the annual feast of the Kingship of Christ in 1925. The 1920s were a time of rapid change and uncertainty. A time of great migrations. A time when the rich were getting richer and poor were getting poorer. People were anxious and scared. They were seeking security, and many thought they could find it in populist leaders who in short interval became the horrendous dictators of the mid-twentieth century. Does any of this sound familiar, folks?

Pius said that instead of such earthly strongmen, we "*must look for the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ.*" (*Quas Primas*, §1) In what sounds suspiciously like a Roman Catholic altar call, he goes on to say:

If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds...He must reign in our wills...He must reign in our hearts...He must reign in our bodies and in our members. (Quas Primas, §33)

"...purchased by his precious blood..." No other king can lay claim to being the Lamb of God. A lean sheep on the edge of the flock. Naked, thirsty, condemned, crucified. And no other king can lay claim to being one with God, resurrected in glory as our shepherd to restore not just individual sheep, but the whole flock to abundant life, a loving and beloved community.

Judgment is certain. And so is mercy. With eternal life as our hope, may our singular motivation be love, always love. Eternal life doesn't begin when we die. It's here and now, as we join Christ in his work of restoring the entire flock to wholeness.

(Motion to crucifix) Behold our King! (Motion to all of us.) Behold his Kingdom! Let us go forth and be the church of the Kingdom of Christ. And let the people say: Amen.