

November 26, 2023
The Sunday Last before Advent, Year A
Feast of Christ the King
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Grace to you and peace from God who is and who was and who is to come. Amen.

A century ago, after the end of WWI, a man in Rome looked around the world, and didn't much like what he saw. Armed conflict had ceased, but there was no true peace. The empires of the Hohenzollerns, the Romanovs, the Habsburgs, and the Ottomans had all vanished. Unbridled, often violent, nationalism was on the rise, along with authoritarian leaders like Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler.

This Italian fellow, who happened to be Pope Pius XI, wrote a letter about the situation, urging people to seek the "peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ."¹ In 1925, in a second letter,² he established the feast we celebrate today: the Feast of Christ the King.

Well, hang on a second, you say. We live in a country that showed George III the door. What are we supposed to make of this king thing? We seem to be of two minds. How many of us were glued to the television for the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, and then the coronation of Charles III? How many of us loved every minute of Netflix's series *The Crown*, until we hated it? It might be simpler for us to say that we have no king but Elvis.

All joking aside, it seems that we who do not live under the authority of an earthly monarch might be ideally suited to understand a king like Christ. At least twice a week, we say that we get it. In both the Creed ("and his kingdom will have no end") and in the Lord's Prayer ("your kingdom come on earth, as in heaven"), we say that we believe in a state of being that is without end, and quite unlike the world we know now.

The Bible is full of royal imagery for God and for Jesus: from the First Book of Chronicles, *yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all* (29:11), to the

¹ *Ubi arcano Dei consilio*, para. 49. 23 December 1922.

² *Quas primas*, 11 December 1925. It is interesting to note that the *Lateran Treaty*, which recognized the Pope's sovereignty over Vatican City and finally resolved the conflicts that had stood between the Italian government and the former Papal States since 1860, was signed in 1929.

Psalms, *Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.* (110:1) to Revelation (19:15), via Handel's great chorus, *Hallelujah: King of kings and Lord of lords.* Even St. Paul, in today's lesson from Ephesians (1:23), writes, *and he has put all things under his feet.*

In the fourth century, as the Church became first the beneficiary, and then the ally, of the power of imperial Rome, it's small wonder that images of Christ as King came to look more and more like earthly monarchs, and less and less like the Christ of the gospels. The royal Jesus that Matthew offers us today is homeless, sick, imprisoned, hungry and naked. This is the Jesus who stoops to empty himself, taking the form of a slave.

Which King Jesus should we choose? The one enthroned in glory, attended by angels, or the one sitting at an intersection with a cardboard sign? Episcopal priest and theologian Fleming Rutledge insists that we must see both ... at the same time.

She writes that this is the secret, that "the Son who 'sits upon his glorious throne with all the nations gathered before him' (Matt. 25:31-2) is the same one who, at the very apex of his cosmic power, reveals that the universe turns upon a cup of water given to the littlest ones in his name"³

The God we worship as the God of power and might is the very same God who is present in the panhandler we cross the street to avoid. No wonder we have trouble seeing this kind of King. To us, it makes about as much sense as our God appearing in a manger or on a cross.

Highlighting this tension, the ancient tension between the two natures of Christ, divine and human, helps me to understand a particular feature of today's gospel. What leaps off the page when I read this story is that everyone is surprised! Everyone. Sheep and goats, righteous and unrighteous. We hear the phrase "when was it?" four times in this gospel story. When was it? No one had figured out that when they were dealing with the "least of these" – the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the overlooked – they were also encountering the Lord of heaven and earth.

Matthew's Jesus seems to say, "Do you want to see me? Look to the needs of your neighbor and the stranger in the here and now." Experiencing God's presence is not limited to a mountain-top experience, or the end of a grueling spiritual journey. God's royal presence is also experienced with actual, physical bodies in this time and this place.

Thornton Wilder makes this point beautifully in his play *Our Town*. The play's central character, Emily, is given a chance, following her death, to view a scene from her

³ Fleming Rutledge, *Royalty Stoops*. <https://www.religion-online.org/article/royalty-stoops-matt-2531-46/>

past. She is told not to choose an obviously significant day, but an ordinary day. She is told that re-visiting even the *least important* day of her life would teach her something very important.

Emily chooses to re-visit her 12th birthday and discovers many things about that day she had completely forgotten. More importantly, she is stunned to see how fast life moves and how little she or anyone paid attention to what was happening when it was happening. In the end, Emily cannot bear to watch. "I can't go on," she cries. "We don't have time to look at one another . . . Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?" she asks.

The answer, Emily learns, is pretty much no. For most folks, being alive is "To move about in a cloud of ignorance." Lord, when was it you? Why didn't you say something? Our cloud of ignorance is not living in the here and now; not seeing who is right in front of us.

You and I spend a lot of energy planning for the future, especially this time of year. How many of you have every day between now and Christmas all planned out? Meals to prepare; presents to buy and wrap. Sometimes, the opposite is true, and we spend a lot of time looking over our shoulders with a mix of nostalgia and regret. Almost all of us are focused on either the future or the past; what we will do or what we didn't do.

Emily in *Our Town* is surprised; the sheep and the goats are surprised, too. Is there a way for us not to be surprised? To remember that some of the most important things we do in life seem, at the time, to have no real significance.

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The state of the world in 2023 doesn't seem much different than it did in the 1920s. Borders drawn by the winners of war are in dispute; nationalism, often violent, is on the rise, as are authoritarian leaders across the globe. Maybe we should take the image of Christ as King seriously...but with care.

Do we see Christ's separating the sheep and goats as some sort of vindication of us triumphing over them? If we do, I'm afraid we've got hold of the wrong end of the scepter. In the same way, folks who busy themselves with good works because they will look good on their permanent record also miss the point. Both approaches, you see, are self-centered and self-protective – me and Jesus; me and heaven.

So then, where is the good news here? Where is the blessed hope we can treasure? Remember the Great Commandment and the Summation of the Law. Be loyal to God, to your neighbor, and to the stranger, who is as you are. This is God's invitation to us; this is God's dream for us.

The Reign of God is not about lording power over others. The Reign of God is about helping others to flourish in community. The Reign of God is not about requiring others to change to suit us. The Reign of God is about living our regular and our best lives with each other. We help each other, both neighbor and stranger, into the Reign of God, and we are transformed in the process.

When was it, Lord? The day is today, my friends. Keep awake – there is no need to be surprised. In the words of St. Paul, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, decide today to look, really look, into every face you see, knowing that there, you will catch a glimpse of the God whose will it is to restore all things in the well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords. Let us pray:

Hasten, O God, the coming of your kingdom; and grant that we your servants, who now live by faith, may with joy behold your Son at his coming in glorious majesty; even Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.