

What Kind of King?

A Sermon for Christ the King, Year A

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When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

We've arrived at the end of the liturgical year—the last Sunday before Advent is the feast of Christ the King (or, officially, for our Roman friends, The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, which to be honest sounds waaay cooler).

Christ the King is actually a fairly recent addition to the liturgical calendar, instituted less than a century ago in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. In a time of ongoing strife between the Catholic Church and the Italian state, the feast was meant to remind Christians that their true and first loyalty was bound to a heavenly and not an earthly authority.

While certainly not theologically inaccurate, this was a highly political message, and a good reminder for us today that the work of the church and the work of the world has always been muddled.

It's interesting, though, that such a comparatively modern feast day draws on such archaic imagery. The idea of Christ as king can feel foreign, especially in 21st-century America. It can feel like something out of a history book or fantasy novel. It might even feel overbearing, or like a departure from the Jesus we've been hearing about through the rest of this season of Ordinary Time.

Add to that heavy metaphor the lectionary readings appointed for today, all judgment and apocalypse, and the end of the church year starts to feel an awful lot like the end of the world—are we sure we *want* the Son of Man to come in glory and sit on the throne of his glory?

The readings tell us about the kingship of God, but they also tell us what kind of king God is—which carries both comfort and challenge.

For the comfort, I go back to the Ezekiel reading. The Old Testament God can get kind of a bad rap sometimes, but listen to these words:

I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the

injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

These are not the words of a king of the apocalypse; they are the words of a shepherd who will do anything for a most beloved flock of sheep.

But this passage also points to the challenge. The shepherd of Ezekiel is concerned with the lost, the strayed, the injured, and the weak. Or, as Matthew's Gospel so memorably phrases it, the least of these.

Matthew is where our challenge really comes clear. This king says, *"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

But the inverse is also true: *"I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."*

This is the kind of king that Jesus is—the kind who watches for his sheep, who cares for the lost and weak, who upholds the least of these. We've heard these words enough that perhaps their radical nature is dulled for us. Caring for the least of these is not easy and it is not safe. It can go against our instincts and make us uncomfortable. But it is nothing less than what Jesus requires of us.

I'd like to turn, briefly, to a story of the early church. Lawrence of Rome, a deacon in ancient Rome, was asked by the Roman prefect to bring forth the treasures of the Church that they might be given to the Roman Empire. Ambrose of Milan tells us that he went away only to come back with the poor and the destitute. "These are the treasures of the Church," he exclaimed. The Roman prefect was so revolted by this response that Lawrence met a violent martyr's death.

I think Lawrence was following closely in Jesus' footsteps as far as upending expectations, and perhaps even closer in his understanding of the Church not as an institution filled with many beautiful and valuable things, but as a community dedicated to upholding the least of these.

This upended the Roman prefect's expectations, and produced a violent response. I think it upends our expectations as well, though I hope our reaction is not quite so violent. It can be so easy to become set in our ways, in our comfortable lives, that we forget our true treasures. Yes, it's wonderful to have a beautiful building with stained glass, a sonorous organ, and a lovely collection of vestments, paraments, and silver. It is *wonderful* to have these things. But these are *not* the treasures of the church. And yet, aren't these the things we lock up and protect?

It gets more challenging: the king doesn't say "I was hungry, and you donated money to a worthy charity, I was thirsty and you showed up one time at a soup kitchen" or "I was sick and in prison and you sent thoughts and prayers." The call is for us to get our hands dirty, to truly open our eyes and see the world as God sees, and to jump in and *do* something.

And yes, we will be judged for the choices we make. That's not a comforting thought—it comes with a lot of baggage, and the idea of destruction and eternal punishment is a hard pill to swallow. To address all of that, I would need far more time than a homily affords, particularly one I'm already well into, but I want to pull out two important things.

First, our God is not a God of fear, but of life. We don't need to live in constant fear of judgment. God loves God's sheep, and that is not a love with an expiration date. God's will is not for us to live life in terror of damnation.

But I also want to affirm that we will all be met with judgment. Our choices, our lives, do matter to God. Except, maybe this isn't something we need to approach with fear, either. Judgment, after all, is simply discernment, the ability to make considered decisions or come to sensible conclusions. I think God's judgment is going to be not so much fire and brimstone as an honest and loving look at where we did well and where we fell short. In words attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "Judgement is whispering into the ear of God the life-story you have been too afraid to tell."

On Christ the King Sunday, remember that we serve a king of judgment *and* mercy, a king of glory and peace, a king whose concern is not with thrones and power, but with the poor and lost. As we enter the Advent season and anticipate the coming of Christ, look to the king who treasures the least of these, and remember that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.