

Sermon for Christ the King Sunday, November 26, 2023

By The Rev. Mary Elmiger-Jones, Deacon

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 & Matthew 25:31-46

We have a lot to unpack today, don't we, but at least we heard a similar theme among all our readings this morning. That is on purpose as the Christ the King feast is close to 100 years old. It was started in 1925 by Pope Pius XI because of the horror and death that came out of WWI. He saw that people were traumatized and needed hope. They needed to know how to look at God and his son following the losses and destruction of the first world war. Pope Pius' answer was to institute the celebration of Christ the King on the last Sunday of the church's calendar year, where Christ's supremacy over the world and its governments are made clear. And, where we can say publicly that our hope is in Christ above all others.

It was to point in a different direction, away from a world at war and towards a King who was dependable, who is our source of salvation and justice, and gives meaning to our lives. And, I would add, it was an attempt to take the word, King, and apply it to Jesus Christ who could be thought of as the ultimate King, above all human persons with that title. In our lesson from Ephesians today, Paul says: *God put his power to work in Christ...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.*

So first we see that Paul wrote those words 2K years ago, again in a time when the Romans ruled much of the civilized world, and the Jews and many other peoples were at their mercy. Paul is also looking to hold Christ over the Roman government and all leaders to point to a new way to view Christ's role in the world both then and in the future. Pope Pius used these words by naming Matthew 25, Ephesians & Ezekial as the Gospel and lessons for today to describe his viewpoint to Christ as King.

This viewpoint sounds like someone who is trying to sway the world that there is a way to look at the one who is in control, who has the power over the world, and is the only one who can save it. Because all the losses and destruction, horror and death that emanated from that war, was started by the politics of the monarchies that existed for hundreds of years some 100 years ago. WWI was the beginning of the end to the divine kingship of the family rulers over their countries. WWI brought down empires, the Ottomans, the Kaisers, Austria-Hungary, etc., etc. And it was not the end of war, in the next generation of children growing up, the world watched as WWII began its first breath as a consequence of the punishments given that were too much for citizens to bear.

We have seen many wars in the 20th century and here we are in the 21st, with war still among us daily. The current Israeli-Hamas war being the latest, having just started on October 7th. We are again reminded today that *while governments come and go, Christ reigns as King forever.* I will come back to this reality of war and how we can feel hope and strength and what God can provide to help us in this way.

One of the seminary teachers when I was in Berkeley named Rev Sue Singer made a comment about saying Christ is “King” that stuck with me over these last 14 years because it rang true to me as well.

She said, do not refer to Christ as King to me. I know what Kings are and Christ is above all of that.

Rev Sue was British and knew all too well the flaws and dereliction of ruling among many of the Kings of Britian. To call Christ a King was to demean him, in her view. I agree with her reasoning and would prefer to call Christ something else in honor of his presence among us always.

You see, for Pope Pius, in 1925, he used language to describe Christ’s reign and our subsequent obedience to him as: Christ must reign in our minds, in our wills, in our hearts, and in our bodies in perfect submission with Jesus as the Lord of the church and our entire universe. Now if this way of speaking of the reign of Christ speaks to you, gives you clarity and comfort knowing that Christ is above all human titles and requires us to obey his laws and seek out justice, that is good. You do not need to change your perspective.

If you are more like me, where the language falls too much in requirements and less in desire—of us and our relationship with Christ—than let me offer a different viewpoint. We all come together with our own views, which gives us strength to see across multiple ways of defining who God is and what he needs from us, and what we desire from him. I want to use the concepts of love, of nurturing us, of feeding us, leading us and saving us from our sinful ways. I also want one I can count on for mercy and justice, for hope and optimism, for compassion and yearning for our love given back freely to God. Is this a feminine way of looking at God? Perhaps. As I said, we all have our voices and that is what gives us strength.

I do not need to look far for this word, and it is so different than the title of king, you may be surprised to hear it. In the passages from Ezekial of the Old Testament, and from the gospel of Matthew, we are told the story of Christ the shepherd. Both Matthew and Ezekial are using the shepherd passages as allegories, or the symbolic, (in the case of the Bible, spiritual) meanings in addition to the literal one. We have heard in the gospel stories about many roles Jesus uses in his parables, lessons, teachings. He is a master at his use of responding to a question with another question, and often one that digs into the heart of the matter at hand. Jesus has spoken about stone masonry with his touchstone comment, about vineyards and their management with his many parables of the owners and workers in the vineyards, and what they are paid versus what is thought to have been earned. We have fisherman (this is more actions than stories), we are told that Jesus and his father, Joseph, were carpenters. We are told of farmers and actions that take place in the Jewish temple and synagogues. And we have shepherding, many stories of lost sheep and like today, judgement to the heard. Jesus is a brilliant man with seemingly endless examples to make his points. He used commonly known stories that would resonate with the people who were listening to him.

It occurred to me, what did people know about shepherding, such that it was a powerful example of love, guidance, being looked for and found, and finally to have justice applied? There is the sheep as food, but it had to be more, and then I realized why sheep are so central in the first century Jewish life. What are lambs used for—sacrifice in the temple. This means there was a lucrative business herding sheep and bringing the perfect lamb to be sacrificed. Most Jewish people would be aware of this means to make a living and thus the stories of Jesus made an impact to them.

In Ezekial, he was referencing the shepherding that the King of Israel David would do, with God looking over him. *I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.*

In the Old Testament, this was stated as an act of love and nourishment for the flock. We have images of the sheep being fed on good pasture, where they will lie down in good grazing land. Ezekial further states that *God will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.*

God is speaking through Ezekial of relationship, of a loving caretaker with those within his charge. Yet there is judgement, and we find that clearly identified in Matthew's gospel where the lean sheep will be separated from the fat, and the goats from the sheep. Why? Well Matthew gives us the words of Jesus telling his people how to avoid judgment, how to act in relationship with God and the world, how to act with intention and compassion. Leave judgement to him, Jesus says, do the actions that people need from one another. We are rather explicitly told what to Do, how to act, what to leave alone and what to be concerned with. This is a template for the Christian life, it is what God asks us to do. Judgement is how we refuse or make excuses for our lack of following through; we bring this on ourselves, as humans do for most things where either through laziness, or ignorance, or feeling above others or the situation, we fail to do what will save us. And by save us I mean that which will transform us to be the hope in this world. If we are not transformed, we fail, falling into defeat. This is the judgement Christ means when he says you will go into eternal punishment. Eternal because we can't see our way out of it. Punishment because we are separated from our God who loves us. It is up to us; we can change at any moment. Christ's examples of those who were paid a full day's wages for an hour of work gives us the proof that God is merciful and compassionate. We always have the chance to do what is asked of us. We always have the opportunity to bring light into darkness, to overcome evil with good.

I said that I would come back to the issue of war and how to address the despair one feels when thinking about all the suffering among all sides. We need to turn ourselves towards what we know to be truth and love, to do good, as God requested of us in our gospel reading today. We are told explicitly to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, give clothing to the naked and visit the sick and those in prison. Images of the victims of war come to mind as they are hungry, cold, traumatized, sick. So many are children. Atrocities happened to both the Israeli and Palestinians, there is so much need.

Did you know that the Ahli Arab hospital is governed by the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem? This has been very much in the news and the situation is, as they say, catastrophic. Since 1982 the Diocese has owned the hospital, the largest and only Christian hospital in Gaza City. It is a haven of peace and hope in one of the world's most troubled areas. The hospital adopts a rights- based approach and provides healthcare regardless of faith, gender, social class or political affiliation. In Arabic, the name means "The Arab People's Hospital". I have been giving to the American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem for many years and will do so this year as well. I will give money to be used for the greatest need as they define it.

You can give to the Israelis as the survivors of the massacre will undergo many years of therapy to recover from their mental and physical wounds. There are other wars that would welcome your checks as well, such as Ukraine or Darfur where a genocide is taking place. Look up on the internet and you will find multiple ways to support people in the most dire need.

We are not limited to warfare, because there is always a need at home as well. Two weeks ago, this congregation provided warm coats for those that need them to stay warm this winter. There are food pantries to give to or volunteer to provide a friendly face and welcoming hands. You can give money to people who need help paying their heating bills, or electricity during the winter. There are always sick people, or lonely people to visit. I can say that doing this will transform you. One of the most wonderful things I have done at St Columba's is to visit people who are recovering from injuries. I have been changed through their presence with me, more than they are. It feels so positive to visit someone and to spend time with them, talking and praying.

There is no lack of spreading our generosity, kindness, compassion, and faith in action with others. This is what Jesus asks us to do for him. It is spreading the gospel in the world through actions. This reminds me of what St Francis of Assisi said, Preach the gospel always, and at times use words.

The world is a complicated and messy place. I don't have answers why things happen or not. All I know is what I found to be true: to save myself, I must give myself in service to others. You all have given yourselves today by coming to worship together, to pray and sing and listen. Find someone in need and reach out to them. You will be transformed by this action. And I believe it is a way for us all to change the world one day at a time. Jesus asked us to do nothing less. Amen.