

Christ the King

Nov. 26, 2017 | The Rez

Good morning and welcome.

If you've been with us over the past few weeks you'll know that we've been exploring faith, hope, and love, waking to new life in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

Today we're breaking new ground as we celebrate Christ the King.

If we think of the Christian calendar, this is not only the culmination of a long stretch of ordinary time since Pentecost—when walk by the Spirit even while longing for Jesus' return—but it's also the entry point to the season of Advent.

So, together we're looking far off into some other time to see Jesus as king, in the grandest sense, when he'll finally return in glory to make things right.

At the same time, we find ourselves among God's people in ancient times longing for the coming of the Messiah.

We've got two vantage points today, at two extremes: we're journeying to the very end of all things with Jesus leading the way, but we're also returning to the beginning, hoping against hope that God's promises could somehow come true.

Our Gospel reading for today is from Mt. 25:31-46:

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you

did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

This passage is probably familiar to most of us, but let’s walk it out together. Jesus tells a story about a shepherd-like king who comes to rule over the whole world. Ascending the throne, he gathers the nations to himself and divides people out into two groups—the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Turning to the sheep, he pronounces blessing over them and welcomes them into his kingdom, commending them for the good things they’ve done. Turning to the goats, he declares them to be cursed and banishes them to eternal fire, denouncing them for the good they’ve neglected. Along the way, the sheep and goats are surprised to learn of their fate and the implications of their behavior in life. They’ve been relating to the king without knowing it, whether through care or neglect. The parable ends on an unsettling note. The sheep go away to eternal life, the goats to eternal punishment.

I was reading this passage with my daughter Brooklyn recently. When we finished, we sat quietly together. “Who do you think this is about?” I asked.

“Jesus,” she said.

There was a pause.

“Only it doesn’t sound like Jesus.”

That struck me as a really honest answer. “It doesn’t sound like Jesus ...” Maybe you can relate to that. I certainly can.

What is it about this picture that feels so strange and out of place?

It’s a question’s that’s been nagging me for some time.

There might be a few things going on here. Maybe the most obvious is the way it jars against other depictions of Jesus in the Gospel.

What of the Jesus who taught his disciples to love their enemies?

Who had compassion on notorious scoundrels like Zacchaeus?

Who refused to retaliate when he was made to suffer unjustly?

Who cried out from the cross “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

Think of that plea it relates to the confusion of the goats ...

What does this figure of compassion and forgiveness and grace have to do with the powerful, majestic Jesus that we’ve read about this morning?

It can be challenging to hold these figures together.

But there’s something else that’s even more troubling.

Think of how this image of divine kingship has been abused down through the ages.

The Gospel of Matthew was written at a time when Christians had very little social capital. But it wasn't long before Christianity became ascendant in Roman society, backed by political power.

This changed everything.

What happens when power leads Christians to identify a little too closely with the majestic judge of Jesus' parable? History's got the answer to that one. It becomes really easy to justify violence and coercion in the name of Christian faith.

As in the crusades.
Or colonialism.
Or the slave trade.
Or the subjugation of aboriginal peoples.

If you've got the power of sovereignty and judgement why *not* use it under a Christian banner? Why *not* establish the kingdom with force? Jesus' parable would have been unsettling enough for the original listeners. It seems additionally challenging for people like you and me who are acquainted with the history of the church and long to distance ourselves from the abuses of Christendom. Which isn't easy despite our desires.

The problem isn't just violence and coercion. It's also the power we enjoy more generally. Notice what the sheep are commended for. They provide food for the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, visit prisoners.

To the post-Christendom enlightened reader—to the truly woke—this gets at the essential purpose of Christianity. It's the mandate to fight injustice, to serve people in need, and to transform society.

Of course, this feels more true to Jesus' teachings than fighting religious wars. And Christians are increasingly drawn to it, turning Jesus' ethic into a program of social reform. But there's a challenge here too. Which might escape our notice.

How do we understand ourselves in the activity of fighting, serving and transforming?

Who are we?

Notice the workings of power.

We are people who can diagnose problems and invent solutions.

We are people with agency and special abilities to affect good in the world.

We are people who have been enlisted to build the kingdom with confidence.

It's quite natural to imagine ourselves as revolutionary world changers.

This is the narrative we've been living with at least since the Enlightenment.

But is it really who we are and what we've been called to?

For good reason, we want to distance ourselves from the abuses of Christendom. And we rightly desire to counter those abuses by living a more authentic kingdom life. But for all our critique of crusaders and colonists, we continue to struggle with their misplaced confidence, often behaving, if not believing, that the world is ours to save.

I'm reminded of this song by Bruce Cockburn:

What's been done in the name of Jesus?
What's been done in the name of Buddha?
What's been done in the name of Islam?
What's been done in the name of man?
What's been done in the name of liberation?
And in the name of civilization?
And in the name of race?
And in the name of peace?

Everybody
Loves to see
Justice done
On somebody else

This is our struggle. It doesn't matter what banner we fly. When we take justice into our own hands, we end up forcing our agendas and behaving as if we are alone, left to our own devices. And there are consequences.

We end up fighting dirty though we mean to act justly. We become impatient and suspicious, even of friends. We get tired and cynical. Walls go up. Things fall apart. And along the way we fail to appreciate our part in the evils we'd resist.

Yes, Jesus' parable can be unnerving and difficult to take in. It's not simply the image of a triumphant king who judges the world, embracing some while rejecting others. It's also the problem of our own power and the haunting awareness of how easy it is to abuse, even when we want to do good.

All of which can come home with a rush when you're reading the Gospel with your daughter.

So what do we do with all this?

How are we to make sense of Jesus' parable on this day when we celebrate Christ the King?
Let me give it a try.

I think we'd do well to remember the original situation of the parable.

Jesus isn't speaking to people like us. A people who can easily assume a position of strength and imagine that change can come if they only band together with the right people on the right side.

He's speaking to others.

He's speaking to people who are aware of their vulnerability, of the unwieldiness of evil and injustice, of the relentless ways that leaders domesticate God to serve their agendas.

This is one of the reasons why Jesus can be difficult for people like us to get.

So, what's the point of the parable? What's the good news?

It's just this:

Jesus is the only one fit to be king.

He's the royal shepherd of Ez. 34—God himself, come in person. He's the one who faces down the bad shepherds and goes looking for the sheep who've been scattered.

He's the one who gathers them in and gives them safe pasture, making them to lie down in peace. He seeks for the lost, he brings back the strayed, he binds up the weak. He brings justice to the fat and the strong.

"I will save my flock," he says, "and they shall no longer be ravaged."

This is who Jesus is. And there's no one else like him.

But there's more.

Jesus is the only one we can trust to make things right.

And this is precisely because he refused to hold on to power. He emptied himself and took the form of a slave, laying his life down in suffering love. Even unto death. *This* is how he gathers and protects and heals and saves. Right now. Here in our midst. It's the way he gives himself to the world, drawing people to himself at the very lowest, most vulnerable point.

Jesus didn't come in strength. And he still doesn't.

Instead, he arrives as a stranger or prisoner in need—even a criminal on the cross—making himself available to us ever anew in divine weakness.

The question today is this:

Do we have room for a king like this? Can we see him in his coming?

These aren't easy questions, for people like you and me.

Yes, it involves caring for the poor, the sick, and those in need—God help us if we can't see this.

But not as if we're anxiously striving to bring in the kingdom without a king.

Rather as those who are poised to receive good news and unexpected gifts through the most unlikely people in the strangest of places.

It's about receiving not achieving.

This is precisely what the sheep find themselves doing in the parable, quite beyond their own awareness or expectation.

Unlike the goats, they've opened themselves to the king and welcomed him in.

And they've done that by caring for those who show up in Christ-like poverty with good news on their lips—the ones Jesus calls "my brothers and sisters."

These are not people who've taken justice in hand. Nor are they trying to save the world. They are simply making room for the king to come.

So what does that look like? How do we give ourselves in love so as to receive the true king? That might require a whole other sermon to answer.

But I think we can get a glimpse of it in another part of the Gospel that will come into focus for us in the coming weeks. And with this I'll conclude.

Remember how Jesus first appeared on the scene. Born as a helpless baby. In a backwater town. To teenage parents. Without status, without a home. Soon to become a war child. What better example do we have of responsive, embracing love than the Magi who followed the promised star and welcomed the king with costly gifts?

Or the shepherds who heard the angelic message of peace and good will and gathered at the stable to share their joy.

Or Mary—most especially Mary—who said “yes” to God and made room for the king in her very body, celebrating his justice and mercy in a song.

Bethlehem seems like a really good place to be. Manger-side. Let's go there together. Amen.