

Last Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 29, Year A: November 22, 2020

You can view this service on YouTube at this link
https://youtu.be/7_pDz0__7Wg

The Sermon: Rev. Carol Ruthven

Christ the King / Reign of Christ Sunday

“Come, let us sing to the Lord; let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.” Ps. 95:1

As the season of Ordinary Time in our church calendar draws to a close, this morning we celebrate Christ as our king. This celebration, first known as “The Feast of Christ the King,” was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. That was seven years after the end of World War I, when there had been horrific loss of life in the war and economic hardship. Many Christians had begun to doubt that Christ existed and questioned whether the Church had the power to continue Christ’s authority in the world. Non-Christian or nominally Christian dictators were rising to power in Europe and they often attempted to control the Church. There was growing secularism and declining belief in Christ and in the authority of the Church. Pope Pius hoped that faithful Christians would gain strength and courage in a feast day to celebrate the reign of Christ in the world and in their lives.ⁱ

In many ways, our lives today are similar. People are weary of wars that seem to never end. Many people are emotionally burdened with the devastating loss of men and women, who have died serving overseas in the military. Many soldiers who return home are struggling with debilitating injuries and trauma as a result of their experience on the war front. Churches and Christians in America are deeply divided over doctrine, as well as political and social issues. Many young adults are critical of what they see as the hypocrisy of church leaders, especially with regard to sexual abuse, racism, and financial crimes committed within some churches. Materialism and secularism seem to be increasing at breakneck speed. As a result, church membership in mainline denominations is declining, including in The Episcopal Church.

So where do we find hope? As Christians, we find hope in God and Jesus Christ. Perhaps more than ever, we need to focus on the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ. We celebrate Christ the King Sunday today before the beginning

of Advent in one week. During Advent we anticipate the birth of Jesus as the newborn King and the second coming of Christ.

To our modern ears, the word “king” can sound dated and irrelevant. Many of the kings in countries that still have monarchies have immense wealth and their lives of extraordinary luxury are completely foreign to us as hard-working Americans. This was also true of our ancestors living in Israel under the harsh and exploitive rule of monarchs, such as King Herod.

It is helpful for us to recall the unique way in which kings and their authority were understood in the Old Testament and ancient Judaism. The image of a shepherd was used to describe kings. God was viewed as a compassionate and caring shepherd, who protected and guided his sheep, the people of Israel. This is beautifully expressed in the ancient words of the psalmist who said: “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” Ps. 95:7

In the Old Testament, to have power over others meant that it must be used for the benefit of those with the least power. This was explained by Jesus when he said: ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’ (Mark 10:42-52) This is known as “servant leadership.”

In ancient Israel and throughout the ancient Near East, the king was judged by how well he cared for the widow or orphan.ⁱⁱ In today’s Gospel lesson from Matthew, we learn about the day of judgement in which all nations and people will be judged based on how they treat the most vulnerable and least powerful.

A distinction was made between goats and sheep. In Palestine, shepherds usually had mixed flocks of goats and sheep. At night, the shepherds separated the sheep from the goats. The sheep could remain outside because they had thick wool coats; while goats had to be protected from the cold. The sheep were preferred over goats, because the sheep had more commercial value.

Matthew portrayed Jesus as the shepherd that would place the sheep on his right side and the goats on his left.ⁱⁱⁱ The judgment about who would be considered a sheep or a goat depended on how people treated strangers, the hungry and thirsty, the naked and the sick, and those in prison. The author Anne Lamott has asked rhetorically, "Who was it who said that to get into heaven, you needed a letter of recommendation from the poor?"

Today's Gospel lesson is often preached to remind people that as faithful Christians, they should always take care of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. I think there is also another important lesson in today's Gospel lesson. Problems can arise when we judge the actions of other people. There is a risk that we can become self-righteous in judging others. I will be the first to admit that I am often guilty of this. I have to remind myself that it is God, not me, who will make the final judgment. Perhaps you have heard it said that "You might be surprised to discover who you will meet in heaven."

I love the wisdom of The Optimist Creed. It says in part, "Promise yourself to give so much time to the improvement of yourself that you have no time to criticize others." This is a helpful reminder for me. As fragile human beings, we all behave like sheep sometimes and like goats at other times. If we are honest, we recognize that in one way or another we have all sinned in the eyes of God. We can each strive to behave like good sheep, but we must also be humble enough to recognize those times when we fall short and behave more like goats.

It is not our job to separate the sheep from the goats. The kingdom of heaven is not a private club in which we get to judge others and to hand out the entry tickets. Our job is not to be the gatekeepers of who gets in and who is excluded. Our job is to follow Jesus' example of servant leadership and to practice the way of love. We follow Jesus' example by providing unconditional love and care to others, especially the least among us.^{iv}

While we may disagree with some people's opinions and object to their actions, we should not judge or reject them as persons. The history of the church has countless examples of persons, including King David, who had sinned mightily and yet were

redeemed by God's love, grace, and mercy. Perhaps if we respectfully listen to and care for the person who we disagree with the most, they can experience conversion and become a loving, faithful Episcopalian and follower of Jesus. Love always trumps hate.

Our hope is knowing that God continues to love us and all others. No one is invisible to God or exempt from God's love, mercy, grace and compassion. In entering the holy season of Advent, as we gaze upon the light of the Advent candles, we can find hope in knowing that Christ is our king who brings light into our world. And it is through Christ's presence in our hearts, minds, and souls that we in turn can bring hope and Christ's light to others in our world. AMEN.

ⁱ "Christ the King Sunday," <http://www.churchyear.net/ctksunday.html>

ⁱⁱ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 157.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 25:31-46, p. 333.

^{iv} The Rev. T.J. Tetzlaff, "Reign of Christ (A): It's Not Up to Us," <https://modernmetanoia.org/>.