

Long Live The King!

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

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Christ the King Sunday

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

I

On May 7, 2023 20.4 million people round the world watched as King Charles III of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth was crowned in Westminster Abbey. The high point of the ceremony came as the Archbishop of Canterbury placed the heavy St. Edwards Crown upon his head and proclaimed, loudly, “God save the King!” It was a moment that united people across the world, a moment that transcended political differences, royal intrigue and palace drama. The King was crowned to rule and reign. It was a moment of convergence!

There are such special moments in all our lives, times when everything comes together. Duties, dreams, desires, suddenly, in an instant, life comes visibly together in one time and place. Can you think of such moments in your life? I think of our wedding day, our children’s baptism days. I think of high school and college and seminary graduation days. I think of my ordination day.

Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, these are high holy convergence days, marker days which lift up the major points of our faith. Christ the King Sunday is such a day. At Christmas we celebrate Jesus Christ’s incarnation in human flesh. At Easter we celebrate Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead. At Pentecost we Celebrate the Coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church. Then at this Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the year, we celebrate that when all is over, said and done, Jesus Christ rules and reigns over us from Heaven as our true and eternal King. Jesus welcomes us as his family. These high peak moments offer us a sense of perspective, a renewal of hope in the midst of life’s hard and ordinary routines.

For a number of years, I sang with the Alabama Symphony Chorus under the baton of Dr. Philip Copeland, formerly our Director of Music Ministries, for 16 years, singing alongside Rick Atkerson and Jan Kimble and Susan Karse. One year we sang J.S. Bach’s great “B Minor Mass”. For me this was one of those converging moments when everything just came together. This was a massive 2-hour workout for choir, soloists and orchestra. It was a massive work out for Bach himself, his most complicated and difficult work.

Called “the crowning achievement of sacred music,”ⁱ the B Minor Mass is itself the converging expression of Bach’s life and work. It is really a composite of many of his cantatas, worked out over his whole career, woven together with new choruses and arias, added and all of it synthesized into a unified whole so that the various complex parts fit together.

Being a Mass, it follows the main movements of the historic Christian service, even as our service here moves, from confessional Kyrie, to exalted Gloria, from plaintive Crucifixion to exalted Resurrection, ending in a massive Amen. So, it has solid structure, to which vast creativity and variation are added. Musically and theologically Bach's B Minor Mass has it all, and brings it all together. It is the most difficult "beast", as Philip Copeland called it, that I have ever attempted to sing.

Christ the King Sunday, the last day of the Christian Year, is such a day when everything converges. Everything comes together. The day was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in the chaotic times after World War I to respond to growing secularism, disillusionment, nationalism and atheism. The Pope wanted to remind Christians that their allegiance was to the King of Heaven, Jesus Christ, as opposed to the earthly supremacy, then claimed by Benito Mussolini and soon, Adolph Hitler. Later many Protestant Churches added this day to our calendars to emphasize the cosmic rule and reign of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as we anticipate that day when he will come for the final completion of all things, and to judge you and me, and the nations of earth, the stars of the universe, and bring all under his rule and reign.

II

Our Lesson from Matthew 25 portrays the Great Judgment before the enthroned Lord Jesus. The camera pans back. Before him seated on his throne, are the nations of the earth, all who have ever lived or ever will ever live. This parable is the highpoint and climax of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel. Everything in the whole of Matthew points toward this. Everything, has been moving toward this, and preparing for this dramatic parable, this last public utterance of Jesus before Jesus offers in the Jerusalem temple entering into the events of his passion. Here Jesus, the great teacher, gives his greatest teaching, his last lecture.

We are familiar with the importance of such final statements, where one attempts to sum up the essence of what they have been about. We think of George Washington's "Farewell Address" warning of foreign entanglements, of Dwight Eisenhower's final address as President warning of the almost unstoppable military-industrial complex. There was Douglas MacArthur's farewell speech before a joint session of Congress after President Truman removed him from command, where he concluded, quoting an old slogan, "old soldiers never die; they just fade away." A few years ago, we remember how Randy Pausch gave his famous final lecture at Carnegie Mellon University which went viral before pancreatic cancer claimed his life, telling the packed hall of students to hang on to their dreams and to enable the dreams of others.

Such final addresses are found many times throughout the Bible. There is Jacob on his deathbed blessing his sons and pronouncing the attributes of each of the twelve tribes. There is Moses on Mt. Nebo, and really through the whole of Deuteronomy, giving his final words to the next generation. There are the last words of King David reminding of God's everlasting covenant with him and his descendants.

"One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land."ⁱⁱ

In this parable Jesus is portrayed as he really is, and finally will be, the great victorious King seated upon his throne. It follows parables which sought to give some explanation as to why the final coming of the Lord is delayed, and our need for readiness as we wait: the servants who maintain the master's household faithfully until he returned, the bridesmaids who needed to have oil in their lamps, the servants who wisely invested the resources entrusted to them until the master returned. Now, though the coming has been delayed, the final day has come.

With this Parable of the Great Judgment history is complete. The Son of man has come in great glory with his battalions of angels. Here is a scene from the heavenly throne room, now brought to earth. Life is over and judgment has come. The Son of man is in the business of separating, the just from the unjust, the saved from the lost. The sheep from the goats. And the basis upon which the separation is made is how people have treated the least of these who are members of Jesus' family: The poor, the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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."

Those who respond with caring and compassion for these are welcomed as sheep. Not welcomed because of their good works, but doing good works, reaching out because their faith is giving them eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to love, and wills to serve, the least and the lowest. Those who do not are termed goats and cast into eternal fire.

Perhaps most amazing is the response of the sheep people to the words of the Son of Man in his glory, "When Lord did we do these things in caring for you?" And the Son who is the King replies, "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."ⁱⁱⁱ

Notice who Jesus includes in his family. Not simply the washed and scrubbed and cleaned pious church people. But the poor hungry thirsty prisoners and strangers. These are needy outcasts who Jesus yet counts as his own. And he says, what you did to these whom the world counts unimportant, invisible, aliens, you did to me. Jesus our King is giving us powerful instructions about what his church is to be doing in these in-between times as we await this final scene.

III

It is often said that our faith involves both belief and actions, our creeds and our deeds-together. Evangelism and acts of justice together. What I want to say today, out of Jesus' final teaching, is the Church that Worships Together – Serves Together. Worship and Mission belong together. There is no separation. No saying, I will worship, you will serve. I will sing hymns and offer prayers, you will build houses and feed the hungry and visit prisoners. Our faith is necessarily both. One leads to the other in both directions. If you think of it, God expects quite a lot out of a bunch of sheep. God is counting on us.

Sheep and goats are images of simple animals, common to Palestine of Jesus' day. Goats get the rap in this parable. They are the bad guys. But then sheep too are generally not considered the sharpest animals in the neighborhood. They are clumsy, near-sighted, eating whatever is in front of them. Yet they are deemed worthy.

Our Old Testament reading refers to both shepherds and sheep. In this reading there are both good and bad shepherds. Bad shepherds neglect their sheep. Good shepherds care for and provide for their sheep. We are to live as God's faithful people, good shepherds and sheep, the metaphors here mix. Good shepherds who look after and do not abuse, neglect or ignore the needs of their sheep. And sheep, who though simple, perhaps dumb, are yet blessed. As Ezekiel's vision says,

"As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I the Lord, have spoken."^{iv}

What I hope you grasp here in this final parable of Jesus is the balance and rhythm between worship and service. The Son of Man comes in glory. "The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now." Jesus, who lived among us, taught, healed, then died on a Roman cross and was raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and from there he rules and reigns as King! As Master, Lord and God! He is worthy of all worship, honor, praise and glory. He demands all of our worship. As we seek to grow in faith we will continually be people who gather for worship of our King!

We gather to worship. But we do not leave it there. We depart to serve. The Church that Worships Together – Serves together. Our worship concludes in meaningful service in the World. Because God loves us we worship. We lift our hearts in thankfulness. Because God loves us we serve. We reach out to the needy that come across our radar. We cannot fix everything, but we can fix something and someone. Leaving the Sanctuary, we enter the mission field.

The astounding thing about these who are feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, these who have been living the life of sheep, servants of the glorious King, is their utter unselfconsciousness about what they have been doing. They have been doing those good caring acts that, as they grow in faith, had become natural for them. As they drank in the teachings of the Master caring for the hungry, visiting prisoners, clothing the naked, these have become simply reflexive. "When was it that we saw you Lord hungry or thirsty or a stranger or sick or in prison, and responded in caring and compassionate ways to you? They were doing the deeds of Jesus' people, not because they self-consciously recognized these needy as the Lord, but because as Jesus' people they had become compassionate caring people.

What does the King expect of sheep? What does the Lord expect of his people? He expects us ordinary people to undertake extraordinary actions, deeds of loving kindness and mercy. “With deeds of love and mercy the Heavenly Kingdom comes.” Maybe small good deeds, but one deed heaped on another. Jesus expects us to be those who are helping to make right what is wrong in the world. I see many among this congregation who are doing such caring loving acts. Making a difference for good.

In his book Living With Your Dreams, David Seamans writes about a conversation he overheard between a young man and his coach as they were preparing for the state track meet. The event was the high jump. The young man was most diligent and dedicated in his training, and the coach continued to push him to excel. He kept raising the bar higher and higher. Then he put the bar at record height. If he cleared that height in the meet then he’d win the state record. The boy said, “Coach, how do you think I can ever jump that high?” And the coach replied, “Son, just throw your heart over first, and the rest of you will follow.”

That is what Jesus is asking you to do today South Highland! Throw your heart first, and the rest of you will follow. We worship a Great God, a God of miracles, a God of second chances and new beginnings. Out of exalted worship, with hearts of love we go forth to serve, we give, we make a difference. We enter the mission field!

God save the King! Long live the King!

Amen.

ⁱ So stated by Alfred Mann

ⁱⁱ 2 Samuel 23:1-7

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 25:40

^{iv} Ezekiel 34:12-13, 23-24