

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 26, 2023 – CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY / PROPER 29 (YR. A)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*A Kingdom of Power and of Peace*”

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24	(The Lord will seek out His sheep and be their shepherd)
Psalms 95:1-7a	(Sing to the Lord, shout for joy, come with thanksgiving)
Ephesians 1:15-23	(Jesus' Name is above all names, now and forever)
St. Matthew 25:31-46	(When Christ returns, He will separate the good from the evil)

Despite how things appear, the universe is not one of chaos where mutually contradictory forces endlessly contend. As Christians, we believe and can be certain there is a central—and final—authority. That there is only one rightness, only one truth, and that the One seated on the throne of heaven is the eternal expression of perfect peace and harmony as well as of absolute power and control.

Over against the intolerable ugliness which defaces human life, in Christ as King we behold the perfect beauty of God, a loveliness that is complete and glorious. Scripture assures us that all human judges will be judged by divine standards, and all earthly kings will be subject to the King of Kings. In every era of disintegrating worldly authorities and mounting human aggressions—such as we are currently living through—we realize this wretchedness has limits and will one day end with justice, as we catch a vision of the throne before which all other thrones must bow.¹

No earthly power or spiritual evil can stand against the reign of God in Christ. In fact, God is so sovereign, He can use the very forces of evil to *destroy* evil—just as, through His death on the Cross, Jesus Christ destroyed once and forever the power of death.

Today's Gospel lesson is not a parable, but an apocalyptic vision of the last judgment. Jesus' purpose in telling the story is not for His hearers' speculation about, or fascination with, “The End.” Rather, it is about the coming of the Son of Man, not to earth—for that has already been done—but to the throne of heavenly glory, as He is at last installed as Priest, King, and Judge. This enthronement is also, according to St. Matthew, the Final Judgment. A Hebrew author, he uses imagery from the treasury of Jewish thought.

When we hear about separating the “right” from the “left,” these were common terms in both Jewish and Gentile culture for “favored” and “unfavored” positions. The phrase, “inherit the kingdom” in verse 34 comes from Israel's tradition about the promised land. And “from the foundation of the world” (v. 34) draws upon the Jewish view that everything essential for God's eternal purpose existed before the world was made. In other words, all that pertains to God's will is not contingent upon *anything* in the created order.

It's important that we look at the two elements that are the basis for the Final Judgment. First is our response to human need (vv. 35-36). These needs are not extraordinary; rather, they have to do with the ordinary comings and goings of human life.

Second, both those at the King's right hand and those at His left are surprised that they have either served or failed to serve Christ (vv. 37-39). The element of surprise is a touching portrait of those saints whose service to others is so much a part of their character they are embarrassed at the recital of their deeds and amazed to learn that ministering to those in need is ministering to Christ Himself. The surprise factor is equally vivid for those in Matthew's community who were busier being “religious” and showing off their spiritual gifts than attending to those who needed concrete, practical care. They are shocked to find out that by neglecting the sick, the poor, and those in prison, they have actually neglected Christ the King.²

If we take today's Gospel too literally, we might come away with a works-righteousness justification for our way to heaven. As Anglicans, we do believe that good works, charitable giving, and social justice are integral to Christian discipleship. But we know that faith in Christ must always come first and last. Jesus requires of us both faith *and* works, not one or the other.

The Brother of our Lord, St. James, puts it best in chapter 2 (vv. 14-22 & 26): "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them,

'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from works, and I by my works will show you faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is worthless? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and by works faith was brought to completion. . . . You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."

The wonderful paradox of celebrating Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, ruler of the universe, as well as time, space, and eternity, is the New Testament's vision of His kingdom as a realm of love, compassion, and care—from God toward us, and from us toward the least among us. Yes, the Book of Revelation is filled with final visions of heavenly armies, evil beasts, destroying angels, spiritual warfare, blood-dipped robes, beheaded saints, and the power of God to ultimately consign every human being to either heaven or hell for all time. However, Christ as the victorious warrior sent to cleanse the world of all its sinful misery does not in any way negate His kingdom as one of peace, joy, gentleness, and kindness; a reign of absolute truth, completion, and perfection; a sovereignty of healing, wholeness, and incomparable beauty. And this is the reward for those who believe in Christ and do God's will by uniting their faith with the works encouraged and approved by Jesus.

Let us pray:

Holy One, enthroned in glory over all creation, You are a shepherd to the lost and the least. Teach us to see Your face among the poor—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting those who are sick or in prison—so that we may share in Your eternal realm prepared from the foundation of the world; through Jesus Christ, who is coming indeed to reign with justice, compassion, and love. This we ask in His powerful Name. *Amen.*³

¹ Adapt. G. A. Buttrick et. al., Eds. *The Interpreter's Bible: Revelation*, Vol. 12 (New York, Abingdon, 1957), pp. 563-564, 577.

² Adapt. Fred B. Craddock, et. al. Eds., *Preaching Through the Christian Year – Year A* (Philadelphia, Trinity Press Int'l., 1992), pp. 518-519.

³ Adapt. "Prayers for Christ the King / Reign of Christ Sunday," *Presbyterian Mission Agency* <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/prayers_for_christ_the_king.pdf>