

Last Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

November 22, 2020 – The Reign of Christ

The design of our liturgical year has some interesting features. We know that it is divided into seasons – the seasons of Christmas and Easter; and of times before each of these seasons – the preparatory weeks of Advent and Lent. Then there are the Sundays in what is termed Ordinary time – Epiphany and Pentecost; each of these longer seasons has a marker at the beginning and at the end. Epiphany begins with the holy day of the same name, and ends with a celebration of the Transfiguration. Pentecost also begins with a Sunday of the same name and ends with the celebration of the Reign of Christ, or, as some call it, the Feast of Christ the King. Today, being the last Sunday of the season of Pentecost, is therefore a Sunday which emphasizes the Reign of Christ. And while it, admittedly, may not have the same ring to it as “The Sunday next before Advent”, or Stir-Up Sunday, it is, indeed, the last Sunday of this liturgical year.

Words like “reign” and “king” are obvious indicators of royalty. We are being called to see Jesus today not as one who was defeated by death, but as one victorious over death. Those who reign, monarchs and such, hold positions of power and authority. They live in palaces, wear fancy clothes, eat wonderful food, and have everything done for them. Thank you, Netflix, for conveniently running a new season of *The Crown*, helping us catch a glimpse of royal life in royal places. Royalty stand, at the very least, as symbols of privilege and dominion. So what does this title signify for Jesus? Perhaps, at least visually, we would see a move away from the depiction of Jesus hanging on a cross, a crucifixion image, and replaced by the victorious Jesus, robed and crowned, also on a cross, but now an embellished cross, that has apparently no power over him – a so-called *Christus Victor*. The words of our first hymn today focus on just this image of the Christ: Jesus shall reign where’re the sun . . . Or hymns such as “Crown him with many crowns”, “Rejoice, the Lord is King”, “Lead on, O King eternal.” Pick your favourite.

So, then, how do we reconcile the readings chosen for today, and especially the passages from Ezekiel and Matthew with the theme of Jesus as ruler, or monarch? Really, what do sheep have to do with kings?

Our answer would best be found in our understanding of the qualities of rulers: in addition to power and authority we would hope to find justice, mercy, and a deep care for one's subjects. So Ezekiel speaks of the shepherd who cares for the sheep, who finds the lost, and nourishes the weak, rescues those in danger, and brings them to fertile feeding grounds. And if we need the reminder, this same shepherd has something to say about those sheep who have become secure at the expense of the others: they will be fed with justice.

The words from Matthew come as the finale to a series of stories of the coming judgment and end-times, and are placed, significantly, at the end of Jesus' public ministry. His next action will be to instruct his friends and followers to prepare for the imminent Passover celebration which will coincide with his last supper with them. And, again, sheep appear in this final discourse, as well as goats. The setting is a judgment time in the world to come. The Son of Man is the judge, and the nations are those to be judged, and separated according to their deeds, metaphorically as a shepherd separates sheep and goats.

It is both interesting and significant here that, in the midst of separating and passing judgment, a judgment based on interaction with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, and the sick, both the sheep and the goats express ignorance as to how they interacted with these dispossessed ones. The one who judges responds with those words which may, and perhaps should, haunt us: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me." And, conversely, "Just as you did NOT do it to one of these, you did not do it to me."

We may experience no small degree of discomfort with this story because of the strong emphasis on judgment. We struggle with a God whose actions are centred on judgment. We shy away from a vengeful deity. Our understanding of God, in latter days, has come to be one of compassion, gentleness, love and mercy. Jesus came to be among the people of our world to proclaim just such a God, and, even more, to embody that love and mercy and compassion.

So, then, am I saying that we should conveniently ignore the judgment theme? Is it alright to cherry-pick what we want to believe or acknowledge? Should we pretend that judgment has no place in our faith journey? Not at all.

Perhaps what we easily miss in this final story is the collective nature of judgment. Who did the Son of Man judge? All the nations, where a nation is the sum-total of its people. All the nations gathered before him, where the nations were as sheep and as goats. "As a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats". Collectively, the Lord welcomed all those who had recognized and acted on the needs presented all around them. Blessing is realized when people work concertedly to help heal creation's injuries and weaknesses. Conversely, violence and disruption are the results of a failure to address these needs. Our calling, as people of faith, is to work together, in a variety of ways, as individuals, but even more, as a parish, an interest group, a community, a nation, to bring God's love, compassion, and healing to a creation made imperfect only by our joint actions.

On this Sunday named The Reign of Christ, we bow before the One who has come, and will come, but we also boldly stand with Jesus, the Christ, who has called us to a union with him in actively meeting the needs of the world we share.

As we worship, grant us vision,
Till your love's revealing light
In its height and depth and greatness
Dawns upon our quickened sight,
Making known the needs and burdens
Your compassion bids us bear,
Stirring us to ardent service,
Your abundant life to share.

- Albert Bailey