

A Christ the King 11.26.23

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

Focus Statement: God is the good shepherd, and we get to be the sheep dogs.

It's Christ the King Sunday. Which for me is kind of up there with Holy Trinity Sunday in the "why are we celebrating this" list of church holidays. Most of the time we're celebrating an anniversary of something. Jesus' birth, Jesus' resurrection, Jesus' baptism, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Even Reformation is a day that Martin Luther did a thing. But with Holy Trinity Sunday and Christ the King we celebrate a theological concept. So before we get into the readings, let's get some history of Christ the King Sunday. Where it came from and why it is particularly relevant to our current political climate.

In the list of church holidays, I rattled off, Christ the King is by far the newest. It was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pious XI. Think back to your high school history classes to what was happening in 1925. We're right on the heels of the Great War, what we now call World War I. Much of Europe was still devastated and as people sought strong leaders to fill the void, nationalism was on the rise. In Germany, the Nazi party was starting to make a name for itself. In Italy Mussolini and his Fascist party had recently taken control of the government. Meanwhile in America, we are full Roaring 20s, blissfully unaware of the economic bubble we are riding on and the upcoming crash. Pope Pious saw all this, especially Mussolini's charisma and the unquestioning allegiance his followers showed, and thought, this is bad. So Pope Pious created Christ the King Sunday, to try and remind Christians that their true allegiance lay not with any earthly leader but with God, and anyone who's leadership went against God's call that all creation would thrive was not a leader who should be followed but a leader who should be questioned.

Unfortunately for Pope Pious, while Christ the King as a holiday stuck, his call to look more closely at the sort of worldly leaders who were emerging did not, and we all know what followed.

Guess what friends, there is nothing new under the sun. People following leaders who make bold claims while only caring about their own power isn't new in our time, wasn't new in the 1920s, and wasn't new during the time of Ezekiel some three thousand years ago. The lectionary drops us into Ezekiel chapter thirty-four at verse eleven. The previous ten verses were God talking about how Israel's leaders were "feeding [themselves]... eat[ing] the fat, cloth[ing themselves] with the wool, slaughter[ing] the fatlings; but not feed[ing] the sheep." Israel's leaders were not leading to the benefit of all of Israel, but to the benefit of themselves.

No more, says God, for from here going forward, "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out... I will rescue them from the places they have been scattered... I will feed them... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak... I will feed them with justice."

God's harsh judgement of these bad shepherds and explanation of God's own leadership style is this unwavering declaration to justice. How a society and especially its leaders treat those who struggle with disadvantages speaks volumes about where its true values lie.

Israel's leaders valued power and control. The kingdom of God is a kingdom in which all God's people are equally worthy and important.

Which is a great declaration, but... But since then, we've had three thousand years of various power-hungry leaders grappling for authority in violent and unjust ways. Jesus' ministry was a constant struggle against the Romans. We started by talking about Hitler and Mussolini. The church doesn't get out of this with our noses clean either, remember all that Luther was preaching about? Indulgences and the idea that you could buy your way to heaven with a nice gift to but the Pope nice things. Dear people of God we, and by "we" I mean humanity, we are not great at this. We scramble for value and power; we take more than our share. None of us in this room are Mussolini, but I'd argue none of us have ever had that kind of opportunity either. But all of us in one way or another struggle with our own sense of self-importance or lack thereof. We've done something or not done something based on how others would view us. We've put our own needs and wants above those of our neighbor. We've followed, or at the least not spoken out against, leaders who do not value the most vulnerable in our society. What can we do? We who do not have crowds of people at our beck and call? Are we helpless against these forces?

The parable for this morning gives us not an answer, because Jesus never is big on clear answers, but hope. This parable is the final of the series Jesus has been telling his disciples and followers about how they are to continue his work with urgency after his ascension. This last one is less a parable than it is an apocalyptic drama. Apocalypse, remember is Greek for unveiling or revealing. One of the commentaries I was reading reminded us to

resist the urge to read it literally, as some terrifying day when Christ will condemn those of us who haven't done enough good works, but to read it seriously. In this image, Jesus is showing his disciples, showing us, the importance of seemingly ordinary acts of care.

Jesus paints for us an image of two completely ordinary groups of people, one who have practiced these seemingly insignificant acts of service, the other who have not. And it's tempting, and frightening, to read this and think Jesus is saying, you better be good or else, but I think there's more going on here. Because what's noticeable about all of these people, but especially the ones labeled sheep, is that they didn't know what they were doing. They didn't do these acts of care and kindness because they were trying to rack up points in some sort of scorebook of Jesus. They did them because they were the right things to do. Humanitarianism, caring for each other, isn't some preferable way of being, it is a mark of who Jesus is. In doing acts of care, the sheep weren't earning their way into the kingdom of God, they were demonstrating their citizenship within it.

Dear people of God, "be nice" seems like a pathetically small answer to the problems of our world. What possible power can kindness have? This passage argues that these simple acts, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, listening with openness to the concerns of others, speaking out for those who have no voice, these simple acts of care matter because they are the ways of Jesus. Through them, through us, God transforms the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.