

Christ the King Sunday Year A

Love in Translation

[RCL] Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

The days are getting shorter, the nights are getting colder, and the season after Pentecost is coming to a close. It is the longest season of the church year, marking the time by reminding us what it means to live as a disciple, be good stewards of what we have been given, and how to grow in relationship with God. Our church year isn't a normal, linear calendar. Instead, it is circular, beginning with Advent and ending with this day, the last Sunday after Pentecost. "Always, we begin again," as the Benedictine saying goes.

Many of the church's yearly celebrations have gone on for centuries, with over a millennium of tradition and history enriching them. They mark the events of Jesus' life: his birth, his journey to the cross, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit to remain with us. We tell these stories in our church calendar, year after year. They shape us in a multitude of ways as we become part of the stories—and they become part of us.

Now, here we are, at Christ the King Sunday, the feast day that dates back all the way to...1925. Yes! This tradition is not even 100 years old, yet it came at a time in the world where God seemed to be losing ground. As explained on *churchyear.net*, the devastating First World War had been fought, and the powers of nationalism and secularism were rising. Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King to lend courage to Christians whose faith might be flagging, to remind nations that the Church has a right to freedom and immunity from the state, and in hopes that leaders and nations would be bound to give respect to Christ.

Initially, the feast was celebrated on the last Sunday of October but was then moved in 1969 to its current place in the liturgical calendar to be a vision of Christ to which the rest of the year points. And what a vision it is! The scriptures today help us understand the shape of what the Messiah is to be and it's not quite what we expect.

There's a large mural on the side of a building in downtown Spokane, Washington, that is a copy of artist Pat Marvenko Smith's painting of the book of Revelation's vision of the King of Glory. Jesus is depicted crowned with many crowns, with fire in his eyes and a light streaming from his mouth as he rides a white stallion, cavalry following behind him through a cloud. It is quite terrifying and at the same time completely expected of a Messiah who is coming to judge the quick and the dead. Yet, our scriptures today speak of God as shepherd and Jesus as a just and merciful king, not a militant figure who looks like a ring-wraith from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. Instead, the focus of today's scriptures is not on what Jesus as the great judge looks like, but on how we, as followers of Jesus, have responded to God's call in our lives. This is the last Sunday after the Pentecost—the end of the intentional

time in our lectionary of exploring what it means to be a disciple. This is about discipleship and so it is about us.

Think for a moment about the churches that you hear about in your area. What do you hear about them? How do you hear about them? What are they known for? Most churches have some measure of the Christian virtues that we all value: faith, love, and hope. They always have since churches began, but some have a reputation and others don't. Of course, all the communities are supposed to be living out their faith, bringing about God's kingdom here on earth while they await Jesus. But the community in Ephesus has especially been noticed because of their reputation. The author of the Ephesians epistle has been impressed by the word-of-mouth reputation that the community has for having faith in the Lord Jesus and demonstrating that faith in love. They don't just get together to do nice things for other people and talk about Jesus on occasion. Instead, they believe that Jesus is risen and sits at the right hand of God and they have *experienced* God's power in their lives. They have been changed. They have been transformed. This transformation informs every single thing they do, individually and as a community.

This section of Ephesians is called a thanksgiving prayer, and it tells us something else about what God values in a community: people knowing their destination. They have a goal and because they know what direction they're going, they have become people of hope. In our modern times, we sometimes get the meanings of 'faith' and 'hope' confused, but not the Ephesians. They know that faith means you entrust your life to Jesus today, in the present tense; and hope is about the future, about where our present trust in Jesus eventually leads.

This understanding about the Christian life reflects one of the mottos of the Roman Catholic order of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits. They are to be contemplatives in action. In other words, to be grounded and centered in our faith in Jesus, so that we would know where God was calling us to action in the world around us. If we are all contemplatives that don't do anything with the experience of God's power that we have, then what's the point? If all we do is reach out to others, but don't go back to the wellspring of God's living water and drink deeply, then we've missed our call and can become empty shells. We must have both.

Our Gospel of Matthew story of the sheep and the goats asks us a searching question that can be difficult to bear: are we admirers of Jesus or are we followers? The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard describes the difference like this: "The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in words, phrases, songs, he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, gives up nothing, will not reconstruct his life, will not be what he admires, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires." Becoming a disciple of Jesus is no easy task. Many throughout the ages have admired Jesus, but far fewer have chosen the sacrifice of following.

There is a sign in a church that has gone around on Facebook for the past few years and it says, "Sometimes I want to ask God why [God] allows poverty, famine, and injustice in the world when [God] could do something about it, but I'm afraid [God] might just ask me the

same question.” As Christians, we believe that God has full claim on our lives. We are coming into the season of Advent next week and are reminded that God loved us so much that God would become human—become one of us—so that we would fully understand what that claim was and how deep the love goes. How do we translate this love to others? Jesus tells us in our Gospel today that when we feed or welcome or give clothing or visit the sick or those in prison that we are, in turn, feeding, welcoming, clothing, and visiting him. When people respond to human need—or fail to respond—they are responding or failing to respond to Jesus himself.

Through our belief in Jesus, we have the power to heal other people’s lives, just by our presence in theirs. We are called to be healers. We receive our strength, not from ourselves, but from God. On this Christ the King Sunday, our scriptures are clear about the “immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power for us who believe.” As we complete another turning of the wheel of liturgical time, may we renew our commitment to be grounded in this power to seek Christ in all persons and love our neighbor as ourselves, even though we may look foolish to the world for loving so lavishly, and we may fail. With God’s help, we can also, thankfully, begin again. AMEN.

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