



Last Sunday After Pentecost (P29) – Christ the King

November 22, 2026

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

Opening Prayer |

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Context |

Matthew 25:31-46 comes near the end of Jesus's public teaching in Matthew's Gospel. This passage is part of a larger section in which Jesus speaks about the coming of the Son of Man, the fulfillment of God's reign, and the call to faithful readiness. Just before this scene, Jesus tells parables about wise and foolish bridesmaids and about servants entrusted with talents. Those passages stress watchfulness and responsibility. Here, the focus becomes even sharper in detailing what faithful living actually looks like.

The image is royal and cosmic: The Son of Man comes in glory, sits on the throne, and gathers all nations before him. Yet the standard of judgment is surprisingly plain. The King does not ask about status, accomplishment, or religious appearance. The question is whether people responded to human need: hunger, thirst, estrangement, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment. The passage links the majesty of Christ with the vulnerability of "the least of these."

This text draws on themes found throughout Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. He is present not only in glory, but also in the lives of the lowly and over-looked. Matthew consistently joins devotion to God with concrete mercy toward others. Christ the King Sunday therefore does not present kingship in terms of domination or distance; it reveals in Christ a king whose authority is bound up with compassion, justice, and deep identification with those in need.

Theological Reflection |

Matthew 25:31-46 offers a striking picture of Christ's kingship. The scene begins with splendor: the Son of Man comes in glory, surrounded by angels, seated on a throne. The language echoes with majesty, judgment, and fulfillment. Yet as the passage unfolds, the glory of this king is revealed in an unexpected place. The king is encountered in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.

That movement is essential to the passage. This Sunday's lections might easily suggest a distant or triumphant image of earthly power and the rule of might. Matthew presents something more

searching. The king we meet in this passage reigns with glory, yes, but his presence is also hidden among those the world often overlooks. The measure of faithfulness is not our admiration of our king from afar. It is found, rather, in embodied mercy. Faithfulness to this king means attention to those whose needs press urgently upon the conscience.

The surprise evoked by this teaching is shared by both groups depicted in it. The righteous do not remember seeing the king in distress, and those on the other side do not remember refusing him. Neither group recognizes, at the time when they act (or not) with compassion, that their actions toward the vulnerable are actions (or inactions) toward Christ himself. That detail matters. The passage does not describe isolated acts of religious performance. It reveals habits that true faithfulness is found in perception and patterns of life. Some have learned to respond to need with compassion. Others have learned to pass by.

The works named here are simple, necessary acts: feeding, welcoming, clothing, caring, visiting. None of these are spectacular acts of service. None require wealth, influence, or special recognition. They are concrete responses to human vulnerability. This passage grounds judgment not in abstraction—some abstract concepts of faithfulness—but in love made visible, in action. Christ is not elevated beyond ordinary human suffering. Christ is bound to it. Christ is in it.

This is one of the most demanding teachings in Matthew's Gospel because it refuses to separate piety from mercy. It does not dismiss worship, prayer, or belief, but it insists that devotion to Christ must take flesh in how we meet our neighbor in need. The king's words uncover a truth that runs through the whole Christian life: love of God and love of neighbor cannot finally be divided.

The title “the least of these who are members of my family” has invited much reflection. At minimum, the phrase makes clear that those who have been treated as small, weak, burdensome, or forgettable are not marginal to Christ's concern. They belong close to him. What's more, their condition reveals something about the moral and spiritual health of the wider community. A society may admire strength and success, yet the gospel asks how it treats those who are exposed, dependent, or cast aside.

Christ's kingship in this passage is therefore inseparable from justice. His reign is not maintained by coercion or display. It is made known in truth, mercy, and solidarity with the vulnerable. This king does not stand apart from suffering. He identifies with those who bear it. To honor such a king means learning to see as he sees.

The final verse is sobering. It reminds readers that choices matter, and that neglect has consequences. This passage does not allow indifference to remain spiritually neutral. To ignore the neighbor in need is to ignore Christ. Even so, the passage is not written merely to provoke fear. It is meant to form recognition. It teaches the Church where to look for the living Christ and how to live under his gracious rule.

On this Sunday, this gospel clarifies what kind of king Jesus is. He is glorious, but not remote. He judges, but his judgment reveals the deep, serious responsibility of love. He reigns, and his reign draws attention toward the poor, the sick, the stranger, and the imprisoned. In a world often captivated by power that removes to protect itself, Matthew presents a king who is present among those most in need of care.

To dwell with this passage is to be invited into clearer sight. The question is not only whether one believes Christ reigns. The question is where his reign is being recognized and served. Matthew 25 answers with unsettling clarity: wherever human need calls forth compassion, there the King is near.

Reflection Questions |

- What does this passage reveal about the meaning of Christ's kingship? How does that portrait compare with the powerful figure you see in the world around you?
- Why might Jesus identify himself so fully with those who are hungry, sick, imprisoned, or treated as strangers?
- What is the significance of the fact that neither group realizes they are encountering Christ?
- How does this passage challenge common assumptions about what faithfulness looks like? How does your own life of faithfulness weigh against this portrait?
- Where might Christ be calling the Church—and each of us—to deeper mercy, attention, or solidarity today?

Faith in Practice |

This week, choose one concrete act of mercy: prepare food for someone, check on a person who is ill or isolated, support a ministry of visitation, or offer welcome to someone who may feel overlooked. Approach the act prayerfully and without seeking recognition. Matthew 25 reminds readers that small acts of compassion are never small in the kingdom of God.

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