

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Christus Rex

The Last Sunday After Pentecost: Christ the King
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Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Today is the last Sunday of the church year: the last Sunday after Pentecost, when our Scriptures always focus on Christ as King. In our gospel this morning Jesus gives us a word picture of himself as eternal King of the Universe. He judges every human being at the end of time by dividing them into the “sheep” and the “goats”. This passage is Jesus’ last piece of teaching in the last of his five long speeches in Matthew’s gospel. The fifth and final discourse begins in chapter 24 when he answers the disciples’ question, **“What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3)** There’s much we can learn from this passage of Scripture, especially when we realize that Jesus gave us this picture of the final destiny of every human being just a week or so before he met his own death on the cross.

In Roman Catholic churches the cross is usually a crucifix, a figure of Jesus being crucified. But the *Christus Rex*, or “Christ the King” is a representation of Jesus that’s appropriate for us to think of today. The *Christus Rex* is Jesus on a cross, but standing erect, with his arms extended. There are no nails. Instead of the crown of thorns he wears the golden crown of the king. He is not naked, but clothed in a priest’s full eucharistic vestments. The *Christus Rex* represents Christ the King reigning from the cross. When you think of the gruesome reality that the crucifix depicts, the *Christus Rex* is paradoxical. It’s startling to imagine the brutal instrument of torture that is the cross as place from which Jesus would exercise his reign as king.

As paradoxical as it may seem, Jesus’ death on the cross is the source of his saving and loving kingship. Jesus went from indescribable glory, perfection and beauty in the Godhead to unimaginable shame, humiliation and abuse as a human being. As Paul says in Philippians 2, **“though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”**

This reality is the background for this final judgment of the sheep and the goats we’ve read this morning. Jesus divides all humanity into two groups, one which will enjoy him in his kingdom for a blissful eternity, and the other who will not. Both groups address him as “Lord,” because that is who Jesus is—the Lord, the Master, the King of the Universe. His is the Name above every Name. His Lordship over the creation from the highest heavens to the depths of human

lostness has been validated by his humbling himself to the lowest point of human experience and death itself. Because he has tasted the dregs of what human life broken and disfigured by sin has become, he can reclaim for a glorious eternity every human being who comes to him, no matter how desperate, or helpless, or sinful, or weak or despised they might be.

There are four perfect parallels between the sheep and the goats in Jesus' picture of the final judgment. First, as judgment begins, both groups are put in their places by the king: the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Second, each group is either commended or denounced for their treatment of him and sent to their eternal destiny. Third, both groups are surprised when Jesus tells them that they either did or didn't care for him. And fourth, Jesus tells both the shocking reason they did or did not care for Jesus himself: that he identifies himself with the hungry, thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the prisoners among the sheep. The sheep learn this to their eternal delight. The goats learn it to their eternal woe.

Jesus' identification of himself with his people is the foundation of Christian self-identity. When Paul, then Saul of Tarsus was riding furiously towards Damascus to lock up yet more Christians, Jesus, resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven appeared to him and asked, **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” [Saul] asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’” (Acts 9:4-5)** The sheep and the goats are both shocked to learn that this glorious and all-powerful king, who holds their destiny in his hands, was “in disguise” as the hungry, the thirsty, the destitute, the foreigners, the sick and prisoners among the sheep.

But what separates the sheep from the goats is not only that the sheep cared for this “Jesus in disguise,” but why. The sheep cared for **“the least of these members of [Christ’s family]”** because they knew that Jesus had cared for them in the same way. When they were hungry for him he fed them with his own body and blood. When when they were thirsty he gave them the living water of his Holy Spirit welling up to eternal life. When their sin had made them strangers to God and to themselves, he had welcomed them in gracious forgiveness. When they were naked and vulnerable to God’s judgement, he had clothed them with his own righteousness. When they were sick with the burden and consequences of sin, he had healed them. Jesus identifies with his people because he humbled himself to experience the utter lostness and destitution of humanity without God, and through his victory completely and utterly restored it. Out of awed gratitude for Jesus’ own ministry to them, the sheep care for the people who are less fortunate than themselves--the hungry, the destitute, the strangers, the prisoners.

The goats care for no one but themselves. They are so engrossed in avoiding becoming the less fortunate that they find every excuse to stay away from them. Americans hold to the value of caring for the less fortunate, but we're really ambivalent about it. Medical professionals have long known that if a "do not resuscitate" order is posted on the door of hospital patient's room, the number of people who go into that room drops by 80 percent; not just physicians or nurses, but everybody. When human beings see and experience needy and hurting people, we have a strong motivation to turn away because we fear that we might someday be that needy or hurting person.

In fact, we're so motivated to avoid becoming the less fortunate that as a society we've really done our best to make Jesus irrelevant by doing his jobs for him. Jesus multiplied the loaves to feed the hungry, so we worked so hard to provide ourselves food that obesity is a problem. Jesus gave hope to the poor, so we spend huge amounts trying to eradicate poverty. Jesus made the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame walk, so through medical science and physical therapy we can accomplish these things frequently. We've even learned to raise the dead through CPR and heart defibrillators.

Civilization has made great advances to relieve human suffering. I don't mean to minimize them. But we must never let them lead us to forget that in God's eternal sight, we are poor and hungry and thirsty. The truth of who we are and who Christ is led Jesus in his indescribable love to taste human physical and spiritual destitution and death in place of every human being who comes to him. These are needs that no human science, learning, or philosophy can supply. Only Christ can, because Christ is King. He reigns from the cross as *Christus Rex*.

How Jesus has treated us leads us to consider how we treat those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Let me make three points. First, and most important, is our motivation. Jesus judges on the basis of the sheep's motivation and behavior. They are "**blessed by my Father**" by their faith in Christ, who met their profound and unreachable needs for salvation. Each of us should search our heart before God to see how profoundly lost and destitute we would be without Christ and determine to help needy people out of the life and joy and grace that Jesus has poured out on us.

Second is, who should we help? Jesus says the people the sheep cared for were "**the least of these members of my family,**" his people. Every day we receive requests in the mail for donations to help needy people, Christians and non-Christians. But as Jesus paints this word picture, it's clear that no one knows who the sheep or the goats are until Jesus makes their identities known. The sheep and the goats don't even recognize themselves as such. While we certainly can help and minister to those whom we recognize as Christians, there are others

who don't believe whom God may yet call to himself. We should take to heart Paul's admonition in Galatians 6:10: : **“So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”**

Third is our attitudes towards each other here this morning. Realize that these same old friends and faces you've been seeing here at St. Matthew's for years are Jesus in disguise. We can get so accustomed to our life as a congregation that we forget the foundation of Christian identity: Jesus identifies completely with his people. He has fed us, the poor and hungry. Without him we would have died eternally. He has taken our poverty on himself so in him we can reign in indescribable glory and riches. Let us love and care for one another as he has loved and cared for us. He reigns from the cross, *Christus Rex*, Christ the King. Let us pray.