

“THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING”
Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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My 94-year old mother, who lives in Corpus Christi, Texas, is an avid reader of our church’s weekly newsletter, *The Messenger*. This past week she noticed that today is Christ the King Sunday in the Christian Year. She is a long-time member of a church that doesn’t follow the liturgical calendar as fully as we do. Her church will likely be observing a secular, national holiday in their worship service today – namely, Thanksgiving – which is perfectly appropriate. But my mom was curious and asked me what Christ the King Sunday is all about.

This is a question you may be asking, too. Nearly all Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, but as a Methodist you’re familiar with special days on the Church calendar besides these two big ones. You know about Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Pentecost, and All Saints Day. But are you aware that Christ the King Sunday also looms large on the calendar, that it is in fact the crowning day of the Church Year (no pun intended!)? Do you know what Christ the King Sunday signifies? If you and I are going to celebrate this day, we should know what it is we’re celebrating.

You may recall the story of King Arthur, which is immortalized in T. H. White’s novel, *The Once and Future King*. Arthur, of course, was a king in medieval Britain, perhaps historical, perhaps mythical. The title of White’s book is the English rendering of a Latin phrase said to have been carved on Arthur’s gravestone. The phrase translates, “the once and future king,” meaning that the king who ruled at one time will return at a later time to rule and redress evil. It’s a way of acknowledging that Arthur’s achievements were incomplete, that he didn’t accomplish all of his goals during his first reign; but it’s also a way of affirming that Arthur will be given another opportunity to establish an ideal kingdom, and that he will succeed fully the second time around.

The legend of King Arthur provides a helpful analogy to our celebration of Christ the King Sunday. Jesus is “once a king” here on earth; the problem is, he is a king *incognito* from beginning to end. In our Christmas story, the wise men from the East see in the stars that a new king has been born to Israel, and they come to worship him. When they tell King Herod about this birth, Herod perceives it to be a threat to his own rule, and he responds violently to wipe out the threat before it becomes serious. However, this is the only indication we have that Jesus’ birth causes a real stir in the general public. He is born to peasant parents in a manger, not to royal parents in a palace, and he soon disappears into obscurity. The new king – if he even is a king – goes incognito.

The boy Jesus follows in his father’s footsteps as a carpenter in the backwater town of Nazareth. When he answers the call to be a prophet of God’s kingdom, he excites people with the prospect that he might be God’s anointed Messiah, a political and military king who will overthrow the yoke of Roman rule. But the kingdom he inaugurates is as tiny as a mustard seed and as gentle as a shepherd’s care for his sheep. His rule is not about warfare and domination; it is about forgiveness and mercy. He both disappoints and threatens his fellow Jews; and, because he still attracts a substantial following, he also poses a danger to the occupying Romans.

Jesus’ kingdom mission comes to a screeching halt in the courtyards of the Jewish high priest and the Roman procurator. When Pontius Pilate asks him point-blank whether he is a king, he answers ambiguously: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36a). In other words, yes,

he is a king; but no, he is not the kind of king the Jews are expecting and hoping for. Yes, he is a king; but, no, he is not the kind of king who poses a threat to Caesar, at least not with a microphone or a sword. Still, he is perceived to be a troublemaker, and he goes the way of all troublemakers at that time – the way to Calvary. As he dies on a Roman cross, the only crown he wears is a crown of thorns. Yes, Jesus is “once a king,” but his kingship is misunderstood and rejected, and his kingdom goals are not fully realized in his lifetime.

Now, if the story simply stops here, you and I would have no reason to celebrate Christ the King Sunday. However, the New Testament sees in Jesus a “once and future king,” a king who will come again and reign forever. The entire Christian Year actually moves toward this climactic point. The calendar takes us through the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ, which are visible and powerful for a brief period but appear to end prematurely on Good Friday. And then, lo and behold, God’s mighty acts continue on Easter Sunday and Ascension Day. God raises Jesus from the dead and exalts him at God’s right hand in heaven. Jesus promises to return to his followers to comfort and guide them – a promise he fulfills with the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. But he also promises to return later in-person, in final triumph, to vanquish the forces of sin, evil, and death and establish an eternal kingdom of righteousness and peace.

This is why we proclaim Christ as our “once and future king.” Once upon a time he rules incognito, and his reign produces only mixed results; but in the future his reign will be complete and comprehensive. At the end of history, “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). So, just in case you’ve been wondering, this is why the Church celebrates Christ the King Sunday.

However, before we go head over heels in celebration, we need to remember two important caveats. First, the expectation of Christ’s second coming has prompted some Christians to abandon all interest in the present and become preoccupied solely with the future. To use a phrase which I never tire of quoting, these folks are “so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good.” They see no need to combat evil and injustice in this world because Christ will come again and transport us to a new world where all our problems will be solved. “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be.” The only questions worth pondering are: When will Christ come again? When will this new age finally arrive? When will God’s faithful on earth be lifted up into heaven? And so, some Christians get hung up reading the “signs of the times,” speculating about the precise date of the end-time. They disregard God’s call to prepare for that time by living worthy lives and helping to realize God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Lest we forget, the apostle Paul reminds the Ephesians that the power of God in Christ has been unleashed in “this age” as well as the “age to come” (Ephesians 1:21b). God has already “put all things under his feet and has made [Christ] the head of all things for the church, which is his body” (v. 22). To be sure, God is still locked in competition with rival powers. Sin and death, evil and injustice show no signs of waving the white flag; demagogues and dictators still have their day in the sun. But Paul assures us that Christ is already enthroned as king of the universe, whether it is obvious or not. The movement he started in his lifetime cannot be stopped. And Christ has given to the Church a share in his kingdom mission – and not just to the Church triumphant in the hereafter, but also to the Church here and now, struggling with a global pandemic, with economic anxiety, with racial inequality, with religious apathy. Over against all these adversaries, we are assured that Christ has already won the decisive victory. Because you and I are on history’s winning side, we are called to discard our doomsday projections and think and act like we are on Christ’s side. His victory is also our victory.

So this is one reason we need to be cautious in celebrating Christ the King Sunday: we're tempted to shift our attention to the future king and ignore the king's claim on our lives today. The other reason for caution is that we may not fully grasp who this king is and what this king will actually do when he achieves his final victory. According to Matthew, Christ will appear at the end of history not just as Redeemer, but as Judge.

The passage in today's Gospel reading is often called a parable, but it is really a vision – Christ's vision of the Last Judgment. All the peoples of the world are gathered at this judgment, not just God's chosen people, Israel. There, a separation is made between sheep and goats. Fittingly, the chief actor in the story is initially identified as a shepherd; but notice that he becomes a king. Matthew's readers make the connection: Jesus himself is both the good Shepherd and the righteous king.

But this is where things get really interesting. When the king separates the sheep from the goats, he does so on a surprising basis. What sets the sheep apart are rather mundane acts of kindness to the less fortunate. They are not spectacular acts of charity, but minimal deeds of loving-kindness. To put it another way, the royal judge does not demand that his subjects be great speakers, willing martyrs, or even fervent believers. They are asked only to do small deeds of righteousness for "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40). In Jesus' vision, both those who perform acts of mercy and those who don't are ignorant of what they have done. The king must tell them everything. By doing these modest acts of love, the sheep have thereby loved the shepherd-king, and they are the ones who receive his blessing in the Final Judgment.

Three years ago, I joined a group from our church on a mission trip to Ecuador. I came home gratified, but also frustrated by that experience. So much needed to be done; we had only one week in which to do it; therefore, so much was left undone. I felt that our efforts were well-intentioned and well-received, but I questioned whether they made a real and lasting difference.

Sometime later, I read the story of a Christian woman in her sixties from Wisconsin who went to Haiti, one of the poorest nations of the world. The average life expectancy there is just forty years; unemployment runs somewhere over 80 per percent. This woman, who is named Ruth, went to work as a nurse in Haiti among the poor. Eventually, she began collecting children off the street, children who had been abandoned because they were severely handicapped, either physically or mentally. Most of these children live in Ruth's home until they die, because there is no way they can ever live on their own. Pleasantly, even enthusiastically, Ruth moves about her work, taking time to hug each child when she passes, praising each child, calling each by name. These are children who can barely feed themselves; many of them can only lie in bed all their lives. An American visitor who observed Ruth's ministry to these children said, "I think I've been in the presence of a living saint."

It's doubtful that Ruth would describe herself that way. She minimizes her work. "I just saw a need and tried to do what I could," she says. Another observer asked what enabled her to keep from getting discouraged. Does she feel that her work is effective? Ruth replied, "I try not to ask myself about effectiveness. I try to discipline myself to just do what I can do today, one child at a time, and let the Lord worry about tomorrow." Ruth's witness reminds me that one of the greatest impediments to being charitable toward others is our question, "Yes, it's all well and good, but is it really effective?"

Did you notice, that in the Last Judgment, Christ the King does not say a word about effectiveness? His only questions are, "Did you feed those who were hungry? Did you visit those

in jail?” I’m glad that, in the end, you and I will not be judged on whether or not we were able to effect justice or to change the world. From what I’ve seen, the world is not going to be changed by us. From what I’ve seen, effectiveness is too much to ask of our efforts on others’ behalf.

If you go to a place like Haiti or Ecuador or even a run-down neighborhood in Waterbury, and you’re worrying about effectiveness, if you encounter a life in the grip of addiction, if you really try to reach out to long-term pervasive poverty, and you’re asking, “Now, is this going to be effective?” the chances are that you won’t be there long. Discouragement will get to you and you will flee to some place where you can get results.

I hope that those who are in charge of the government, who make the laws and spend the money, sometimes step back and ask themselves, “Is this really effective?” But most of us are not in charge of much, except our own lives. Our impact on the needs of the world will be local, one-on-one, and not that impressive. The refreshing cup of cool water, the five-minute conversation with a lonely neighbor across the fence, the one-page letter written in sympathy to someone who is in grief.

I know that my life has been made infinitely more livable through a multitude of these small gestures. Think how much more such small acts of kindness mean to those in great need. The person who is in danger of going hungry can tell us a thing or two about the miracle of receiving a gift card to Stop and Shop from our church. The person who has not had any contact with the outside world for two weeks during the pandemic can tell us how a surprise phone call from someone in our congregation, for just a few minutes, is a life-changing event.

Perhaps this is one reason why the sheep in Jesus’ vision do not know the good that they have done. Their acts seemed so small and inconsequential. One imagines them saying, “Lord, all I did was to volunteer for a few hours at the Food Bank. That’s all. I never remember seeing you there.”

When the Christ the King is enthroned in glory, when all the peoples of the world are arrayed before him, when it is our time to stand before the bar of judgment, what will the king ask us? Simply this: “Did you reach out to the unloved and the unlovable?”

“It was nothing,” we might say. But in the judgment of the king, it was a visible sign of the inbreaking kingdom of God. It is God’s job to worry about issues of effectiveness, long-term worth, and global value. It is our job to be faithful; to be, in our lives and deeds, an outpost of the kingdom and a credit to the king. This kingdom takes form through an infinite number of small steps toward the world that God intends. As the Quakers put it, “A great amount of light is produced by a thousand small candles.”

I read about a woman who experienced a bad health scare. For a few days, until all of her tests were completed, she thought she had a terrible cancer. Her pastor asked her, “What on earth did you think during that time before you found out that the tumor was benign?” She replied, “Well, I said to the Lord, ‘Most of my life I’ve tried to do my little part for the Kingdom. I’ll not say that I’ve been the best of your disciples, and I won’t say that I did all that I could, but I did my part. If you’re ready to take me now, that’s fine with me.’”

Perhaps, on that day when you and I stand accountable before Christ, this should be our last and best prayer to our King, our Judge, our Savior. “I’ve done my little part for the Kingdom; such as I have, I give unto you.” In the meantime, because Christ holds us accountable in the here and now as well as in the hereafter, can you and I pray that prayer on this Christ the King Sunday?