



November 26, 2017 based on Matthew 25: 31-46

This is the last Sunday of this church year and in Anglican churches we mark this day as “The Reign of Christ” also known in some churches as “Christ the King” Sunday. This special day was “instituted by the Roman Catholic Church in 1925 to celebrate the all-embracing authority of Christ”¹, and the Anglican Church agreed in principle with the idea and so adopted it. “Since 1970 (the Reign of Christ Feast Day) has been kept on the last Sunday before the beginning of Advent.”² So this is a feast day in our

BAS. But, you won’t find it listed in the BCP. And who says things never change in church land? This Sunday is listed in the BCP as the Sunday Next before Advent. In the old tradition of the Church of England, this Sunday was nicknamed ‘Stir Up Sunday’, which came from the Collect for this day beginning with the original 1549 Church of England Prayer Book. The collect is the opening prayer said at the beginning of the Eucharist Service, so called because it ‘collects’ up the theme of the readings for the day into the introductory prayer to the service. And the collect for the Sunday Next Before Advent? From page 259 of the BCP. ‘Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ Mouthful, isn’t it?

And guess what else traditionally happened on Stir-up Sunday in good English households? The Christmas pudding was made—five weeks apparently being just about the right amount of time for a good fruit pudding to age -- in rum or brandy, to keep it from spoiling while it aged! The Christmas pudding was made after the family returned home from Church. And if made in true tradition, the pudding was made with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and the disciples. The mixture was always stirred from East to West in honour of the 3 Wise Men. Each person in the family would take a turn at stirring, and make a secret wish.³ The British Christmas pudding is the origin for our North American styled Christmas Cakes. In honour of Stir Up Sunday, we’re not making Christmas pudding at coffee hour after church, but I did bring in some Christmas cake for with your coffee!

Today we celebrate this last Sunday of the church year as the Reign of Christ. Our gospel reading from Matthew reflects Christ’s Kingship—the son of Man coming in his glory, surrounded by angels, sitting on the throne of his glory. This selection of scripture is a reading with so much in it, it is so complex, it could conceivably take a month of sermons to get really unpack it all. This story is near the end of Matthew’s gospel. It’s as though he wants to sum up all the teachings he’s been writing down for those in his community who are learning to be disciples of Christ, before he tells the story of Jesus’ journey to the cross. Now, Matthew’s audience was made up mostly of Jews. So Matthew naturally uses images from the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, so as to put Jesus into a frame of reference his readers can understand; like putting Jesus in their context. Much like I try to do for you each week. In Matthew’s gospel, ‘son of man’ is a term Jesus used to describe himself. So gives Matthew brings to his readers an image that was familiar to them, an image of the Son of Man from the book of Daniel (7: 13-14):

I saw one like the son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Also recall that Matthew is the “Kingdom of Heaven” writer, and when there’s a kingdom, well, it needs a king!

¹ The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p. 105

² Ibid

³ www.resources.woodland-junior.kent.csh.uk/customs/xmas/stirup.htm

Matthew in this same story also draws upon another ancient image of God, that of shepherd. In biblical times, and even in some places in the world still today, it's not uncommon for sheep and goats to be pastured today. Although they are different in nature and temperament, their nutritional needs are comparable, and their care not so terribly dissimilar. So, God, the shepherd has gathered all nations-- the entire group together and it is time to separate the flock from the herd. And the sheep go to the right, goats to the left.



This is a story of surprises and paradox. Firstly, both groups are surprised when Jesus confronts them with why they're being separated. Both sheep and goats ask him: "Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink... (and) saw you as the stranger and welcomed you...or naked and clothed you?" The difference of course is in their response.

The sheep, the group on Jesus' right hand, saw the neediness of others, and responded with love and compassion to those in need, as Jesus responded to those whom he saw who were in need. This is what followers of Jesus do. The sheep were doing the work of the kingdom, bringing the care of shepherd to the lowliest of people in the Kingdom. They were bringing the compassion of Christ to those whom others don't see, or choose not to see. And Jesus acknowledges it: "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." (vs 40)

And the other group on the left, the goats? They saw the hungry, the poor, the sick, the unwelcomed—they admit they saw "the least" of Jesus' brothers and sisters, and did nothing, they chose not to respond. And Jesus told them so: "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". (vs45) And in this story, you really don't want to be one of the goats, they don't fare so well at the end.



And the second surprise was Jesus' answer to the question both groups posed to him: "So, just where were you Lord?"

Neither group saw Jesus' presence in those who were hurting, hungry, lonely, cold, imprisoned, they couldn't imagine finding Jesus among those who were without, among those in need. Most certainly they were not expecting to see that it is Jesus himself who is in need, to see it is Jesus who needs us! What did Jesus tell them? "Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

The sheep were bringing the kingdom of God near—and they didn't know how near the kingdom was to them, because they didn't realize the King, Jesus, was right in the middle of it all. They didn't see that when they were ministering to the least of their brothers and sister, that they were in fact serving Jesus. I wonder, might the goats have responded differently, do you think, if they'd known that Jesus was one of those strangers, or one of those who was hungry, poor or cold?

And here's the check in for us, how are we responding? Where do you see Jesus, or miss seeing him? Are you aware that when we minister to those in need, we are ministering to Jesus? Yes, Christ is King, but Jesus is also the lowliest of peasants, another one of those paradoxes of our faith that can be difficult to wrap your head around when you first consider it.

And Christ is not the kind of king who keeps himself above the people, just sitting up there on the royal throne passing judgment. Our King is one who walks with those who others don't see, who is there among those whom others ignore, those who are in need, even if we don't recognize him or realize he is there. And Jesus is the kind of king who walks among all God's people, us too! When we're hurting, sick of body, mind or spirit, or feeling alone or abandoned, you are not alone, Jesus is with you, in your needs, even if you don't recognize him, or realize he is there.

Today we say goodbye to the gospel of Matthew, we start a new year next Sunday focusing on Mark's gospel. We could have called this past year the 'Kingdom of Heaven' year, as we've heard many of the thirty-one references in which Matthew describes what the Kingdom of Heaven is like—the Kingdom of heaven is near, not far away and unattainable. It is like a mustard seed, and yeast, it could be compared to a field of wheat just sown—the Kingdom is organic, active, growing, alive. The kingdom is like treasure, or a merchant in search of pearls. So it is precious and to be sought after. And who is the kingdom for? Remember the beatitudes--the Kingdom is for those poor in spirit, for the righteous, the persecuted. And the kingdom is for those who were like children, humble and trusting in Jesus' ways. And from what we see in today's scripture, when the time comes, the kingdom is for those who are faithful in living out Jesus' teachings.

Let me end with some words from David Lose, one of my favourite biblical commentators. He sums it up so well.

First, there is no doubt that this passage invites us to recognize the presence of God in the need of those around us. In doing so, it affirms one of the central affirmations of Scripture that God gives particular attention to those in need. ... Second, however, might we extend this insight to include all those to whom we give little thought or tend to disdain? Even if it includes those who disagree with us theologically or politically? Those who we despise because of their actions? Those whom we've decided are not just acting in unloving ways but are therefore inherently unlovable and (perhaps?) irredeemable? Might our call on this Christ the King / Reign of Christ Sunday be to imagine that God's reign of judgment defined and reshaped by mercy includes those we are so sure are just plain wrong? Which means that the surprising element of this week's Gospel doesn't only apply to first-century Christians who felt like the world was against them. It may just serve to remind any and all Christians that God regularly and reliably shows up in those to whom we give little thought, those whom we tend to disdain, those who seem beyond the pale of our attention or good judgment.⁴

Because when it comes right down to it, The Son of Man called forth all the nations, we are all members of God's glorious kingdom, all of us brothers and sisters of Christ the Shepherd, Christ the King.

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⁴ David Lose: "In the Meantime" Weekly email commentary: [Christ the King A: Surprised by God...Again!](#) Posted: 24 Nov 2017

