

Reign of Christ - "Coming"

Today is the Reign of Christ, also known as Christ the King Sunday.

This is the last Sunday of Year "A" where the primary Gospel is that of Matthew. Next Sunday begins a new Christian Year, Year "B" where the primary Gospel is that of Mark.

Over the past few months we have heard a lot of parables. We've heard of miraculous healings, of feeding 5000+ of the faithful. Jesus has delivered many sermons, one of the most well-know, the Sermon on the Mount, from where we receive the Beatitudes.

We have heard many stories about dividing the faithful from the faithless. There have been so many stories about division. So many stories about judgment. And with the political and pandemic climate in which we currently live, the judgment stuff is really getting on my nerves.

I'm so desperately tired of the "us" and "them" lines being drawn.

The gospel today is yet another of the "us" and "them" stories. The gospel is titled "The Judgment of the Nations". That's a terrifying title. Because I am quite certain, if I had to stand before my God and account for my sins, I'd be found woefully wanting.

A literal interpretation of this gospel, one I've heard many times before is that the "righteous" are the sheep and the "unrighteous" are the goats. It's always bothered me that sheep are seen as righteous and goats are not. Sheep provide wool, and they know the sound of their shepherd's voice. Sheep are central in the 23rd Psalm with God being known as The Great Shepherd. There's a reason why a Bishop carries a crozier, or Shepherd's Crook. But honestly, sheep can be kind of stubborn, and, when bored, can be incredibly destructive.

Goats are foragers, while sheep are grazers. Goats are mischievous and can get up to mischief. But does that mean that they aren't "the chosen" and the sheep are?

Quite frankly, I'm tired of division. I'm tired of the maskers and anti-maskers. I'm tired of the COVID-19 believers and the COVID-19 deniers.

I'm tired of being afraid.

Afraid of inadvertently spreading COVID-19. Afraid of contracting COVID-19.

Afraid of making the wrong decision about Christmas services.

Reading this passage makes me very afraid.

The gospel passage begins, "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. 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". Matthew further writes that the sheep are the righteous, inferring that the goats are condemned.

At first blush, this passage is about judgment. The righteous and the unrighteous. Yet, I don't think it's quite that linear. I don't think it's quite that cleanly drawn.

Matthew writes of the righteous, the sheep, at the right hand, as those who have served their neighbours. They have clothed the naked, fed the hungry, visited the sick and imprisoned and in doing so, they have done these things for God.

The unrighteous, or the condemned, have ignored the sick, the imprisoned, the naked and the hungry and as such, they will be condemned to hell.

For years I have heard this gospel twisted to indicate that you had to behave a certain way or you would be judged by God, when in fact, you were already being judged by the preacher. "Behave the way I tell you to, or you will be condemned to hell".

I'm not certain that this is what Jesus had in mind when he told this story; when he drew these parallels.

Advent means "coming". It is said we are waiting on Jesus Second Coming, when in fact, Jesus has already come twice. We spent the four weeks of Advent waiting for Jesus to be born. We spend six weeks in Lent waiting for Jesus to be resurrected – for Jesus to come again.

In the Memorial Acclamation we say "Christ is born, Christ is risen, Christ will come again". Three.

At the Reign of Christ we are wrapping up Jesus legacy, his time on earth. We believe, at some point, he'll come back again. And we wait with anticipation for that day, we wait for his coming again. Coming.

Unless you're a goat.

Now what if Jesus is referring to the sheep as those who have been enlightened and the goats as those who are still learning? The sheep know the shepherd's voice, but the goats haven't yet recognized it as belonging to God?

Both sheep and goats are herd animals, meaning they need to be in groups of their own species to be happiest. They can exist together, but don't usually mingle. The sheep stick together and the goats stick together. Both sheep and goats can give milk.

What if, the message in this, for us, imperfect humans, is that we are called to serve God, and we do that through serving each other and especially, the stranger?

What if, this message is not so much about judgment and separation, then it is about service and love. In other words, if you stick to like-minded people only, and never reach out to help your neighbour, you are more likely to be narrow-minded, singular-focused and afraid of the stranger.

Yet if you help those in need, and do so because it is the right thing to do, not because

it's good for your ego and boosts your credibility, but **because** it is what Jesus **would and did do**.

Feeding the hungry. Clothing the naked. Speaking for the voiceless. Visiting the sick and those imprisoned. When we look into the faces of those in need, do we not see Jesus' face reflected?

I guess, what I am trying to say is this:
Do the right thing. Not because it feels good. Or because it makes you look good.
Do the right thing because, when you choose love, it is the only option.

If the tables were turned and you were the hungry, naked, voiceless, homeless person, would you want help? Of course you would.

So while we are called to love our neighbour, why don't we try to look through our neighbour's eyes. Hear with their ears. Walk in their shoes. Love with their hearts.

This year has been a struggle. And that struggle is far from over. We are tired. We are weary. We are anxious. We are depressed. We are numb.

Lately I've been having sleepless nights and difficult decisions. And those difficult decisions will continue, even once we are through COVID-19.

Remember, it is not **our job** to judge. That job belongs to God. And I am very grateful for that. Don't get me wrong, there are times, when I'm not at my best and I am very judgmental. And once I catch myself feeling and behaving like that, I take a step back and reassess my motivation for behaving that way. Most often its because I'm anxious or afraid. And after the self-assessment I ask God's forgiveness.

Let's take a closer look at the Collect for today:
Destitute king,
one with the hungry, the naked, and the scorned:
may our faith be proved, not in dogma and piety
but in serving you in the last and the least;
through Jesus Christ, the stranger's Lord. AMEN

Does this prayer make you uncomfortable? Can the king of Kings be destitute? Can we prove our faith through service and not dogma and piety? In the words of Moderator Richard Bott, "May it be so, may it be so."

Here we stand, at the threshold of a new Christian year. What kind of year do you want? We all want a year without COVID-19. But that is not 2020. And it won't be 2021. As we embark on a new Christian year, let us mark that year with promises and plans to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, speak for the voiceless, visit the sick, love the addict, support the mentally and physically ill.

Let us be gentle with everyone we encounter, especially with ourselves. This has been a calendar year of firsts, and Year "B" will also be a year of firsts. We will Worship, not as

we wish, but as we are able. We will modify plans. We will find different ways to be together. Perhaps we will find different ways to connect?

Through the grace and love of God, and the grace and love of each other.

Happy New Year and thanks be to God!

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