

Bible Study: Christ the King (A) - *November 22, 2020*

The texts for Christ the King Sunday in Year A mince no words: from the beginning of the Ezekiel text to the end of the Matthew text, they work together to tell the story of what kind of reign we can expect from Christ. On a Sunday like this one, some questions may be helpful to explore around the whole concept of Christ as king:

- What strengths and challenges come up when you imagine Christ as a king or God as a ruler? How does this image resonate or not resonate with you, from where you are located in the 21st century?
- How might Christ's life, death, and resurrection rule us differently than human governments and rulers?

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

The term "shepherd" is a common motif in the ancient Near East, and is metaphorically used for the rulers, kings, and leaders of Israel. In this reading, the shepherds have fed themselves instead of the sheep, and the leaders have ruled with tyranny and cruelty (v. 4). Thus, the sheep lack a shepherd.

In verse 11, Yahweh will take personal responsibility to seek the lost, restore the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak sheep who have suffered as a result of unjust shepherds, and gather them to himself on a safe pasture where they will be healed. The day of thick clouds refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, "the day of the Lord" (Joel 2:2), when the people were carried to Babylon (v. 12). Contrastingly, the new pasture is metaphorically linked to mountain ranges, watercourses, and uninhabited fields which are signs of life, suggesting a change of social, political, economic, and spiritual status for the sheep.

The binary use of sheep and goats, a ram and goats, lean sheep and fat sheep, the fat and the strong, and one group of sheep set apart from another reflects a cosmological setting: a rescue mission taking on a global dimension, in which God begins to reconcile the nations. God's justice will intervene for the oppressed. In our contemporary understanding, the temptation to satisfy personal ego, materialism, and power at the expense of an ailing society are reminiscent of the fat and the strong sheep. The scattered and bruised sheep

represent marginalized persons and communities, like the increasing numbers of refugees the world over, the homeless in our society, and those facing other insecurities.

We must reflect on questions such as “What is our role in protecting and restoring God’s creation?” (v. 18-19), with the understanding that God is determined to bring about a fairness where everyone will be held accountable (v. 20). God will achieve this through his servant David, a symbol of unity bringing together Israel and Judah, and upon whose leadership the Messianic reign will be announced.

- What do you think of when you think of a new pasture for God’s sheep?

Psalm 100

In this psalm of praise, God is named as creator and king, faithful and merciful to all the lands. Unlike our other readings for Christ the King Sunday, the central function of the people in this song is to rejoice, to be joyful, to praise and move toward God. With the world as it is, crisis after crisis abounding, it can be easy for us to be ultra-focused on God’s condemnation of what is unjust, punishments or retributions for those who refuse to serve the least of these. Yet, through this psalm, we are reminded that following God is also about joy: joy in God’s creation, joy in our own selves as God created us, joy in receiving mercy, and joy in God’s faithfulness to us.

- When was the last time you experienced a moment of true joy? How can you pray with that moment, lift it up to God, and be thankful for it?
- How can you cultivate moments of joy in your life, even amid hard circumstances?

Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul’s exuberant prayer of thanksgiving for the church in Ephesus is like the joy of a parent who observes a child’s development from one milestone to the next. His joy is that their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ could be seen and testified of in their love for fellow believers. This is the intersection between the vertical and the horizontal relationships. Growth in the Christian life is not seen in the many ecstatic

experiences of the spirit but in works of mercy and charity done out of an attitude of love.

Second, Paul prays in anticipation for their continued growth. He prays for their deeper understanding of Christian faith. The spirit of wisdom is necessary to distinguish between good and evil in the world so full of archetypes. The spirit of revelation is important for growth in the knowledge of Christ. This is the kind of knowledge that enlightens the heart and enlivens the hope of our calling in Christ. It is through this calling that we receive the right of sonship and/hence become co-heirs of the heavenly blessings with Christ.

- Reflect on your prayer life today. Take a few minutes to write your own prayer for a church that you know but you are not a regular member.

Matthew 25:31-46

In this passage, the reign of God is clearly seen as a time of reckoning. Matthew is consistent here in his distrust of religion that does not act in the best interest of the hungry, poor, and lost. Christ the King is the one who will implement a just rule for the world, a rule that privileges those who are in league with the weak, rather than those who are in league with the strong. Likewise, Christ as King can be found in those all around us who are strangers, hungry, naked, sick, in prison, and thirsty. The good news of this passage is the promise that, someday, the world will be turned over—and those who do the work of serving the least will be those who celebrate and rejoice with God. In our current world, with human powers reigning as they are, it can feel as though care for the least of these is an exercise in futility. These efforts may feel like a useless drop in an ocean of pain and injustice, but the promise to us in this passage is that in God's reign, in God's dream, in God's time, these drops create an ocean of restoration. God notices what we are doing, even if the powers and the authorities of this world seem to have no interest—and in time, it will matter.

- Who in your neighborhood is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, or welcoming the stranger? How may the reign of Christ be found there among them?

- Based on who Christ claims to be in this passage, who in your neighborhood is Christ right now?