

Reign of Christ Sunday

Today is Christ the King, or Reign of Christ Sunday, in the Church calendar. It's basically like a liturgical New Year's Eve, when we're able to look back at the last year at where we've been, and who we've been. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, is like New Year's Day – when we look ahead with anticipation at Christ's coming to Bethlehem, and His imminent return to make all things right. So today, we examine what it is to live in this in-between time, where we know that Christ has come, and will come again, and His kingdom has already been established, but yet it's not quite borne out here below.

This morning I'd like us to consider what it means for us to live during this in-between time, where Jesus is King, however the fullness of His kingdom has not yet been attained here. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 25:31-46. **Read Matthew 25:31-46.**

Oftentimes we get hung up on end times ideas which the ancient church didn't hold to. The whole idea of the Church being swept off the earth ahead of a time of troubles is a teaching stemming from the American Civil War period, and runs counter to the message of the Holy Scriptures, which is that God so loved the world – the whole creation, in fact – that He sent His own Son to redeem it. And Jesus tells us in the Scriptures, if we follow Him, we can, and should expect troubles. Persecution and even martyrdom has always been a reality for faithful followers of Christ in every age.

Someday, when our King of Kings returns, He's going to judge all people. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus was telling His disciples about what it will be like at His return. He says, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left," (Matt. 25:31-33).

The Sheep and The Goats

Now I haven't spent much time around sheep or goats, but for the most part, they look quite a bit alike, from what I can tell. The primary difference is that sheep grow wool, and you can use it to make clothing. Sheep tend to go with the flow – they're not real smart, and they follow the herd. Back during the pandemic I had to chuckle, because people were carrying on about folks getting the vaccines as being sheep – and that's exactly what God calls His people in Scripture. I'm happy to be one of His sheep! I hope you are, too.

I can't really say much about goats. I'm not sure exactly what you do with them, besides maybe drink their milk, or eat them. Jo and Melanie tell me that people keep them as pets – that's mostly what theirs are, from what I can tell. And they're cute, especially the little ones. But I suspect that some of those pygmy goats down the road would probably look pretty good on a silver platter for the Who-ville Roast Beast at Christmas time with the Grinch!

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me,’” (verses 34-36). See, Jesus the Victorious King recognizes all these great things His sheep have done for Him.

But His people don't understand. Notice how they respond. “Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and invite You in, or needing clothes and clothe You? When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit You?’” (verses 37-39). They don't get it. They've never seen Jesus hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or imprisoned. The response of the righteous begs the question, “Where is Jesus?”

What You Did for the Least

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did for Me.’ Then He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite Me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after Me,’” (verses 40-43). Jesus explains to the righteous that what they'd done to the least and the lost, they had done for Him.

Do you remember which animal was on the left? It was the goats. And Jesus casts them into the lake of fire. He tells them why: He was hungry, but they gave nothing to eat; thirsty, and didn't offer a drink; naked, and a stranger, and imprisoned, and they didn't care for Him. Here again, their response likewise begs the question, “Where is Jesus?”

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help You?’” (verse 44). Picture it – Jesus Christ, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, on His glorious throne with all the inhabitants who have ever lived assembled before Him, separated, with those on the right entering into the eternal kingdom, and those on the left – well, they aren't happy.

“When did we see You?” they ask, much like the righteous had asked moments before, in bewilderment. You know, the righteous hadn’t seen this Great King – they’d simply seen another human being in need, and expressed loving kindness towards them. But these on the left, wow! What an awesome, terrifying moment this will surely be in their hearts! In other words, they’re asking, “Where were You, Jesus? We didn’t see You.”

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life,” (verses 45-46). How bad it will be for those found being goats on that day! I have to admit – there are times when I’m a goat, rather than a sheep. Maybe a better way to describe it would be more along the lines of being an old mule, doing things my own stubborn way, rather than following what Jesus would have me do.

We’ve Acted Like Goats

I suspect all of us have at times acted more like a goat (or a mule), instead of being God’s sheep, especially when the world is out there, asking the same question I’ve raised at least twice so far this morning, “Where is Jesus?” Retired United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon once told a story about meeting a waitress one Sunday afternoon at a restaurant. After the meal, he asked her, “You look tired, are you okay?” She proceeded to tell him about being up all night with her sick son. He then asked her which day of the week was the hardest one to work, and do you know what the waitress said? She didn’t know Bishop Willimon was a preacher. She told him, “It’s Sunday. All the people come here after church and make so many demands. Some of them are so hateful, and they never tip hardly anything.”

Prior to going into teaching, I watched this play out in retail on a near weekly basis. People would come in, dressed in fancy clothes and suits, and call you every name in the book because the store had already sold out of the specific item they wanted. A co-worker of mine was verbally assaulted by a pastor from the Sidney area for not having the kind of doughnuts he wanted in the early 2000s one Sunday morning before church. Rebecca spent the rest of that week asking questions like, “If that’s a pastor, is that the way Jesus is, too?”

When we’re focused on our wants, and not on others, we dim the Light of Christ emanating from us into the world. She was asking, like the waitress with Bishop Willimon, “Where is Jesus?” Many of our Christian brothers and sisters will tell you that Jesus is in our hearts. A devout Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and United Methodist might tell you that Jesus is present in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We have other brothers and sisters who would say that Jesus is between the black or brown leather covers of a book they wave around from their pulpit when they preach. Some would tell you that Jesus is in the Church. But I don’t think these fully answer the question.

Jesus is found in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He's found in the Bible. He's found in our hearts when we're yielded to Him. Some believe that He's found in crucifixes and icons of Him. And, certainly, we draw nearer to Him when we come together in public worship. But none of these are Jesus' primary residence. The world wants to know, "Where is Jesus?" just like we do with some of those books – "Where's Waldo?" – where you spend hours looking all over for his red and white striped shirt and wacky little cap.

Where Is Jesus?

Where does Jesus say He is to the righteous – and the unrighteous – in today's Scripture? "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison." Jesus is living on the streets. He's in the line down at the Alpha Center. He's waiting to get a coat from the Salvation Army or Fish. He's waiting for a cop to take Him Christmas shopping. Jesus is in the hospital – or probably more likely suffering and sitting out in the cold somewhere because He can't afford the hospital, or have a way to get there. He's in prison.

Notice what else Jesus says, "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did to Me." Wherever people are in need, wherever there is suffering, Jesus is there. He's not there only to comfort – He's suffering along with them. That's where Jesus is. I'm not saying that He's not present here with us this morning – He is – but He's also very present at Mercy Mission House, and the Shelby County Jail.

Jesus wants us to find Him not only here at New Hope, but out in the world, every day – looking for Him, and finding Him in the heartache and pain that surrounds us. Church is where we come to feed and nourish our souls – and to equip ourselves for this great work of being His hands and feet in real, tangible ways. This is what the King says the righteous did – and apparently without them realizing they had done it.

You'll Never Look into the Eyes of Someone God Doesn't Love

St. Francis of Assisi was born into a rich family in Italy in the 1100's. As a young man, he was a real brat. He was spoiled rotten. He was a musician, womanizer, and loved to party – and not the type of parties we can talk about in mixed groups on Sunday mornings. According to church tradition, after one of his many trips away from home, where he had partied without having to be critiqued by his parents for his immoral behavior, Francis was riding his horse and saw a leper beside the road.

In the Middle Ages, lepers were as feared and loathed as they were in Bible times. But for some reason, Francis dismounted and walked up to the leper. He gave the man all the money he had on him – and then – took the man's hand and kissed it. As he put his lips on the man's leprous skin, Francis felt peace in his heart for the first time in his life. He hugged the man, and kissed him on his cheek. The man kissed

Francis' cheek in return. Francis got on his horse and rode away. As he turned to look back at the leper, the man had disappeared – and Francis knew that he had met and ministered to Jesus Himself.

Francis had been struggling for a long time prior to this with the feeling that Jesus was trying to speak to him. It took the presence of a leper to open his eyes to the real Jesus, living all around him. Modern day miracles, where we see Jesus suffering, are still very present in our society. As the Church, do we actively go out, looking for Jesus? I see Jesus every time we minister at the Alpha Center. Sometimes I see Him in the faces of retail workers, waitresses, and even students at the school. Especially the students at the school at Parkwood.

And of course, I see Him in you. Where you see someone suffering – whatever it is they're going through – you'll see Jesus if you look close enough. On this Reign of Christ Sunday, where we consider this in-between era of Jesus already enthroned, but things not quite yet done on earth as they are in heaven, we're called to love God and neighbor. I saw this, beautiful, haunting image on Facebook a few years ago, and it's as true today as it was when I first saw it. "You will never look into the eyes of someone God does not love."

Prayer: Lord, make us instruments of Your peace: where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.