



Christ the King Sunday (A)

Christus Rex

[RCL] Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Kings and rulers are not usually the most obvious or shining examples of spiritual faith. In fact, in today's text from Ezekiel, the prophet has been called precisely because of the mistreatment of God's people by Israel's kings and leaders. At that time, kings were often referred to as "shepherds," but instead of serving the people, these kings and rulers abused God's people and ultimately scattered them in order to take possession of their land and wealth. Their rulers were hoarding the plenty of the land for themselves instead of sharing it with their subjects. Eventually, the people of Israel became dispersed and lost throughout the Mediterranean as far as Babylon, and now they were in desperate need of God's help to provide for them.

This is not unusual, and a quick read through most history books will remind us of the many problems our world has had with corrupt and greedy earthly rulers, including the many monarchs, leaders, and emperors who have failed their people. Even when the Church itself had significant political power, such as in the Middle Ages, church authorities often failed the people and there was widespread persecution, poverty, corruption, and executions in the name of God. Kingship has not generally been an outstanding example of servanthood and compassion with few exceptions. However, in Matthew 25, we read Jesus completely turning the concept of kingship upside down and he redefines everything we know about kings and kingship, to the point that it is nearly unrecognizable. Jesus is very good at this type of reframing of human concepts.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read of a king sitting on his throne who is busy executing judgment. First, we should notice that this is not a story about the judgment of individuals, but rather a story of judgment of the nations. What is being judged are the attitudes that lead either to apathy and neglect to those in need or to compassion and service. Jesus makes clear that the attitudes that devalue those most in need among us must be destroyed; it is truly a deadly attitude. So how does our nation measure up? How does our church measure up? How do we measure up? Do we run the risk of claiming to base our values on Scripture while completely ignoring the call of Scripture? What can we do to turn the tide of apathy and neglect, including among those who claim to follow Jesus? As with all change, change must start with us, with our own attitudes, choices, and behaviors.

Next, we notice the kind of kingdom Jesus describes. In just a few passages before this story in Matthew 20, Jesus tells us that he has come “not to be served but to serve.” Service is Jesus’ calling and mission. Likewise, service is the calling and mission of those who would follow him. In Jesus’ vision and description of God’s Kingdom, the following occurs:

The hungry are fed, the thirsty are given water, strangers and those on the margins are welcomed, the naked are given clothing, the sick are taken care of, and prisoners are visited. In other words, everyone who is poor, hungry, outcast, sick, or despised is treated with love and dignity in real, tangible ways. This is God’s Kingdom and this is, in large part, what we pray for whenever we say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

The biggest surprise in Jesus’ description is that whenever those things occur, whenever the poor are clothed, the hungry are fed, the sick are tended to, the outcasts are welcomed, the “least of these” (as Jesus calls them) are cared for, we learn that we’re not caring for them, we’re caring for Jesus. And whenever we don’t do those things, we’re neglecting Jesus.

This concept was at the heart of Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s ministry. Many of her admirers asked Mother Teresa, “How can you keep serving the poor, the sick, and the dying with such vigor? What’s your secret?”

Mother Teresa responded many times saying, “Whenever I meet someone in need, it’s really Jesus in his most distressing disguise. It’s him I help.”

What would happen if we began to really see Christ in others, even in his most distressing disguises in those around us, and then treated them the way we would treat God in Christ? What if, the next time we saw someone suffering from poverty, hunger, or thirst, we saw Jesus? Or the next time we saw someone sick and suffering or without proper clothing or even a prisoner or a stranger, we saw Jesus?

The king we claim to follow tells us that we will see him in the people we least expect, and he won’t look anything like an earthly king or ruler. If we can’t see the image of Christ in these unexpected people, then we’re missing something essential, because our king is the kind of king who shows up in these surprising ways.

Many of our churches and homes feature a Christus Rex: a carving, statue, or painting of Jesus on the cross wearing a kingly crown with kingly robes. When we look at a Christus Rex or any image of Jesus, if we do not also see the poor, the hurting, the hungry, the sick, the lonely, the prisoner, and the despised: then perhaps we’re not seeing Jesus. And when we see the poor, the hurting, the hungry, the sick, the lonely, the prisoner, and the despised: if we’re not seeing Jesus in them, then we’re not really seeing Jesus. In fact, we are missing out on God’s presence among us in a crucial way.

It is a powerful spiritual practice to begin to take the time to look at our fellow humans, particularly those on the margins of our society, and to say to ourselves, “There is Jesus.” Or to reflect on images of Jesus and see the poor and marginalized reflected back to us.

One man who took this concept seriously and was changed forever by it is St. Francis of Assisi. Francis had long experienced extreme revulsion every time he saw someone suffering from leprosy. Leprosy still exists today in parts of our world and those who suffer from it are often missing fingers, toes, or even limbs, and their faces can become severely disfigured. But Francis knew he was called to push against this natural response he had until one day he was moved to approach and embrace a man with leprosy and show him sincere affection. It was then that Francis experienced an intense conversion that altered the course of his life. St. Francis’ early ministry was actually working with those who had leprosy in a leprosarium in which he could daily show tenderness, meet their needs, and dress their wounds, as though they were Christ himself. Not only did this service benefit those Francis served, but in serving them, Francis himself came to find true peace and perfectness of joy.

Our king calls us to see and serve him in the least of these. We can start today by making a spiritual practice of seeing Jesus in his most distressing disguises and then serving Christ in those in need. In doing so, we will discover that we are changed and blessed. As St. Francis reminds us, “It is in giving that we receive.”

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