

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

Christ The King A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Who Reigns?

I sometimes get lost in my sermon studies. I read from so many sources, so it's easy to get lost. Sometimes I want to understand what a tricky word really means when properly translated from the Greek. Sometimes I page through the Christian Century, reading all the poems rather than the commentaries for the upcoming Sunday. Yesterday I found this poem. It's called Gracelight.

*My son-in-law, addiction counselor,
Tells me to give the unhoused nothing when they ask.
I grace their palms anyway. It gives ME hope.
We don't know how many friends may die tonight
Nor which seeds we plant will split a rock.
We never know how many days we have
Nor how many stars break up under our feet.
He says they need therapy, but they give me grace
Wandering the highway beside my house,
poor as the poor Christ offered blessings.
Did I just say that? Dare to bring in Christ?
I can't let my son-in-law know what I'm doing.
And I will never show him this poem, ever.¹*

We know these feelings, don't we? Feeling different, especially from the people we love, about things that matter deeply. Sometimes we feel angry or hurt or perplexed or distant or even alienated because of those differences. We know these feelings personally and we know them culturally, collectively too. When we're divided about what matters, those divisions can run deep. And they can be very disturbing. They can also be distracting, changing our focus from the marginalized woman on the corner with her little baby girl who needs food and a warm place to stay, to focusing on who is right and who is wrong when it comes to handing out money to people when you have no idea what they're going to do with it.

I love the honesty of this poem, Gracelight. The author dedicates it to his son-in-law, and even prints his name in the magazine. So whether or not he ever shows the poem, it's right there in

¹ Gracelight by Peter Cooley. Published in The Christian Century, November 2023, p.64

black and white. And that says something too. We want to do the “right” thing, don’t we? We sometimes grapple with what that is, but mostly, we’d prefer to do the right thing. And sometimes we feel the need to hide that, in order to keep the peace. Sometimes if we don’t hide, we can appear to be making somebody else wrong. And we see once again, that to worry about what other people think, no matter how precious or detested those other people are, means taking our focus off the man leaning against the overpass wall, who is trying to keep his pants from falling down while he’s talking to people we cannot see.

‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus said, ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. It’s the last Sunday of the church year, the last Sunday of ordinary time, and the time we’re invited to pause and think about who or what really reigns in our lives.

Christ the King Sunday was created by Pope Pius XI in 1925 because he wanted to counter the horrible dread, the terrible violence, the seeming reign of evil that people had experienced in the Great War and its aftermath. He wanted to create an outward and visible sign that the future belongs to goodness, to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and that we belong to him too. He wanted us to remember that dominion belongs to Christ, not to violence, not to war, not to bigotry or hatred, or consumerism, or the free market, or partisan politics or anything else that is of this world. He wanted us to remember and proclaim Christ is King and as the people of his kingdom, the sheep of his pasture, we are subject to nothing, absolutely nothing but Christ. So on this last Sunday of the Christian year, just before we turn toward the advent of the king who came to us as a little baby in a manger, we are offered one last opportunity to reflect on who or what, ultimately is at the center of our lives.

A provocative Baptist preacher once said that the biggest lie told in America is: *“Jesus is Lord.”* I think he was probably right. I certainly know it’s true in my own life. Yes, I want to want what God wants, want to want God to rule in my life... and that seems in concert with “Jesus is Lord.” But I only want to want what God wants. Which is different from always wanting what God wants. Do you see? I wish I only wanted what God wants but it isn’t so. I still want control in the places I want control. I still want to say I’m too tired to have to deal with the trouble in the world. I still want to excuse myself from the discipline of living a life in balance. Even knowing that God wants only goodness for me, I certainly have not surrendered everything in my life to the rule of Christ the King.

So I ask myself, how often do I actively seek out and submit to God’s will in the all-day, everyday-ness of my life? Maybe we let God reign in our lives when we’re together with our church people, but maybe we leave God behind when we’re with other friends. Or maybe we say God is at the foundation of our moral code, but people certainly wouldn’t see that if they looked at our politics or our investments or our credit card statements or the things we spend our lives on. To submit our will to God’s will, to offer

our lives to God's mission, to have God at the center of absolutely everything... I think that's what it means to say that Christ is king in our lives.

It sounds sort of impossible, doesn't it? We try, but I'm sure I've never gotten through a single day when Christ was the king of every moment. And that's ok. I think our heart's desire to make Christ our king is essential. Trappist monk Thomas Merton penned an amazing prayer about that... *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. ...*²

Rather than striving, I think surrender is what is being asked of us. It isn't about behaving perfectly or even well. It's all about giving over. Americans are enculturated to get everything and give up NOTHING, not even a discussion point in a conversation. As impossible as it sounds, a life lived surrendering over and over again is what it is to live with Christ as our king. It really is simple... – not easy, but simple. An extraordinary peace comes over us when we surrender, even in little, tiny ways. Like deciding every single time, you're going to let the other car go in front of you. Or packing your glove box full of one- and five-dollar bills, and knowing that no matter who shows up in front of you saying "anything helps," they will be the Christ for you that day and you will hand over some money without any regard for how it will be used. Or deciding you're just not going to tell one more little white lie because your truth is enough truth and there is just something inherently wrong with not speaking the truth. It's not easy, but it is simple.

I imagine this sounds pretty ridiculous, particularly given the world we live in today. Give everything to God? Become a subject of Christ the King? Really? In this world? In our culture? We live in a culture that says getting ahead matters, being the best matters, the entertainment capacity of our houses and the stuff we fill them with matters. We live in a world where individualism reigns supreme and "self-care" is a multi-billion dollar industry. Even the woman I talked to at the bank about the fraudulent charges on my credit card recently, signed off our call saying "Have a happy thanksgiving and be sure you don't forget to take care of yourself." Cultural self-help instruction from the call center... very telling. No instruction to care for the "least of these." No concern for others. Just the admonition not to forget myself. Giving over is the antithesis of what the world demands of us, even from the local call center. It doesn't make sense. But then Jesus never did make much sense to the ones who made the rules. And he didn't always make sense to the rest of the people either. Loving in the face of horrific violence and hatred? Nope, that doesn't make sense.

Our readings tell us a lot about the kind of king Jesus is. While the gospel is known as a parable of judgment – am I a sheep or a goat – it's more importantly a story about grace and mercy and love, a story about what it means to have Jesus, to have love, at the center of our lives. When I think about Jesus Christ as king over all my life, and put that together with Jesus Christ alive in

² "The Merton Prayer" from *Thoughts in Solitude*, 1956

poor and marginalized and oppressed and suffering people, I think what I come up with is the need to look to my most vulnerable neighbors not just to see Jesus, but to serve Jesus, and that maybe serving Jesus in this particular way makes Christ the king in my daily life. While God's living presence may come to us in the spiritual practices of our lives, surely God is present in the ones Jesus describes as the least of these. *'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.'*

Jesus lived and died like the common people of his time. He was not a king who remained distant and disconnected from his people, set apart because he was God. He lived all the joys and the heartbreaks and challenges that we live. Jesus was a loving shepherd king who knew his followers by name and knew their lives by heart, then and now. Jesus chose to hunker down with the very least of God's beloved. To suffer everything they suffered, and everything we suffer. And in the face of all that suffering, the very human Jesus chose, at every turn, even on the cross, to love with reckless abandon. Jesus was not the sort of king the people thought God would send them. But he was, and is, the sort of king we need.

To live our lives with open hearts and open minds and open hands, to embody a posture of surrender, to see the sacred all around us and Jesus in our neighbors, to let love rule in our hearts seems like a nice start to making Christ the King of our lives. Amen.