

Last Pentecost, Year A, 2023
The Reign of Christ
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
November 26, 2023

Ezekiel 34:11-17 Psalm 100 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 Matthew 25:31-46

Today, our last Sunday after the Pentecost, the church now calls Christ the King Sunday. We picture kings wearing jeweled crowns, ermine cloaks weighed down with regalia; they have staff, horses and a kingdom. The life of a king sounds like it belongs in a fairy tale, or a war, or, today, in endless tabloid stories, books, and movies “based on...” Christ the King, Christ **as** King is imagery far removed from our lives. I do find some meaning in the older term for this day: the “the reign of Christ.” We know the upside down-ness of the reign of Christ: how Jesus came to the world as a baby, lived a fully human life; he hung out with all the wrong people, he suffered. Jesus’ life and his teachings turn kingship on its head. A servant king. A servant leader. Celebrating Christ as king is to assert a living spiritual dimension in this world. Celebrating Christ as king in Jesus’ time was certainly counter cultural; to say Christ is King was a public declaration that the Roman Emperor was not our authority, and that our kingdom has nothing to do with their king’s rule. We think of Jesus, mockingly declared “King of the Jews,” crowned with thorns. Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world. Jesus’ words were blasphemous, not to God, but to the Empire.

We learn from Jesus that there is a cost to discipleship. The New Testament standard of giving is not the tithe, but, in Matthew’s gospel (Ch 22), “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.” Such complete giving, such pure love is impossible to achieve without God. Jesus gives us specific things to do: feed someone who is hungry. Give someone who thirsts something to drink. Clothe someone who is naked. Take care of one who is sick, and visit someone in prison. This giving is the giving of Christ to Jesus himself, to Christ in every other person. We offer ourselves as a way of life, counter cultural actions in a world impressed by power, authority, and attention. Jesus says that we are blessed when others revile us and utter evil about us on Jesus’ account.

Sometimes giving is easy. Laundry is easy. We give out quarters. Well, it sounds easy. It is one thing to say that we are going to pay for people to wash and dry their clothing. It is quite another to imagine that we are serving Jesus when we see people bring in bag after bag of clothes, comforters, stuffed animals, sneakers and more clothes ... how many people live in that household? Sometimes I hope Jesus lives in that house so he knows exactly what we’re doing and how much we’re helping! It is hard to imagine that we are washing clothes for Jesus when that woman yells at me nonstop when she comes in as we are leaving. Handfuls of quarters will not satisfy her; from her words we are – I am – awful, uncaring, hiding money and refusing to give it to her, terrible people. My gut hurts, my heart hurts, *and* I feel angry. How could she not be grateful? How on earth can I see Jesus in her, let alone serve Christ in her? At the core, I know that we cannot do “enough.” There is not “enough” that a random (but devoted!) group from one church can do – without God. The father in Mark’s gospel who cries out “Lord, I believe – help my unbelief!” says our truth. God instills our hearts and guides our hands, feet and our belief; we can do nothing, even believe, without God. I trust God to change the woman’s life in a way that she can see some good, somewhere, and that she might know our hearts. I pray that I find Christ in her, the Christ that calls for justice and blesses “the least of these.” There is nothing inherently religious about giving out quarters, but the giving is transformed through Christ. We are called to serve, to help even one person, one neighbor, one stranger in whom we are to recognize the face of God. Lord, help.

We cannot, in fact, see Jesus in anyone without asking for God’s help. We must ask. We ask, beg, in prayer, to have eyes to see Jesus, to see God’s kingdom, all around us. To enter into the mystery of Christ alive and Christ

again, we must ground ourselves in worship, study, and prayer. We know God the best and the most in Christ Jesus, and to encounter Jesus we have to know him. We know Jesus best in Scripture, in reading, reflecting, studying, connecting to Christians in Word, in liturgy, in ancient ways brought forward to this day.

Even the blessed people, the ones at God's right hand, suffer in this parable. They suffer because they were in the presence of Jesus, their Lord, and did not know it. "When," they ask God, "when did we see Jesus?" The saved, the blessed, "the best" followers missed out on the joy of a life *in* Christ.

As The Rev. James Leggett writes:

It's very clear: No matter how right you are, no matter how much you serve the presence of Christ in others, if you don't pay special attention, if you simply don't look for the Lord Jesus in those you serve, then you won't see him. They overlooked the hidden presence of God in the faces of those they served.

Our call to serve others, to give "our all" is a spiritual call. To try to live the life Christ calls us to live without placing all of that in the middle of some disciplined reflection, prayer and study, is to risk missing the best part of following Jesus. We don't experience the joy. It is the presence and Word of Jesus that transforms a mundane task into an action of joy. Serving the stranger becomes a path into the mystery of God's life, and of our own. (sermonsthatwork Year A 2014)

Bishop William Willimon writes that the thing is:

God doesn't want us to set aside time now and again to serve poor, hungry, thirsty, naked and sick prisoners. God wants a servant's attitude to be woven through the entire fabric of our whole lives. We, like those individuals in Jesus' great Judgment Parable, are called to be so deeply rooted in the Gospel, and so profoundly committed to lives of service, that we instinctively reach out to the needs of the community that surrounds us. Not because by doing so we hope to please God, but because that's the kind of people we have become.

No wonder we say we practice our faith. Maybe it is easier to see a king in grand robes and fine chariots with groomed horses than to be with that king and wash another's feet, to walk with that king to the cross, to stay awake with him one more horrible hour. Imagine seeing the face of Christ and knowing Christ in everyone who waits, who stays awake or sleeps, who stands in the crowd, who finds the empty tomb, who tells the world. Amen.

Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and whilst nursing them, minister unto you. Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguises of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you. And say, Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve you.

-Mother Teresa