

Christ the King A 2023 Matthew 25:31-46

Last Wednesday an evangelical publication released an article by an anonymous author, someone who did not have the courage to publicly stand by their convictions, the theme of which was “I love my child, but I love Jesus more.” It was their justification for rejecting their LGBTQ child, arguing that doing so was a faithful act of loving Jesus. I doubt it was by accident that the article was published the day before people should have been welcoming family around Thanksgiving tables. However, as the intended audience was not members of churches that usually follow the Revised Common Lectionary or the liturgical calendar, it was likely by accident that this article, urging people to love Jesus by rejecting their family, preceded today’s appointed reading from Matthew, where those to the right *and* left of the king ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or imprisoned, and cared (or didn’t care) for you?”...and the king replies, “Whatever you did (or did not) do for the least of these members of my family—that was what you did (or did not) do for me.” A pretty compelling argument against using “love for Jesus” as an excuse to exclude, well, anyone.

Although the metaphor of Christ’s kingship is thoroughly biblical, as we see here, I used to think Christ the King Sunday was a bit outdated—a holdover from medieval times when most of Christendom was governed under monarchies: fine for those people in the past, but somewhat lost on those of us with more modern, democratic governments. But the feast of Christ the King only began in the 1920’s in reaction to the nationalism that was growing in the wake of the war that was supposed to end all wars, but didn’t. The pope was not recommending monarchy as the preferred form of human government but directing disciples to pursue Christian ideals as zealously as they were following national leaders and political movements. So this festival is not antiquated or irrelevant; we don’t get a pass on Christ the King Sunday just because we elect presidents instead of crowning kings.

I spent the last few days of my spring vacation in London, about two weeks before King Charles’ coronation. Barriers and grandstands were being built around Buckingham Palace; roads were temporarily closed to allow the military to drill for the parade; all the shops were selling commemorative souvenirs. All of that pageantry makes good sense if we think about the last coronation having been 70 years ago; for many Britons, this was a once in a lifetime event—a sacred, ancient rite, virtually unchanged for centuries. They maybe have a leg up on us today, understanding what it means to show reverence to the one wearing the crown.

Christ the King Sunday ends the liturgical year, following weeks of end times scriptures and leading us to the Advent anticipation of Christ's arrival and return; yet this festival is not really about the future. We read this and other passages as descriptions or predictions of what will happen at the end of our individual lives or the collective end of the world as we know it, but the king in Matthew's story judges the nations according to what they had already done. We are not waiting for the day when Jesus, who wore a crown of thorns, will turn into the kind of king that human history has honored—with a golden crown and thrones, palaces, and armies. That's not the way kingship works: the king doesn't change to meet the subjects' expectations; the subjects live according to the commands of the king. We are not waiting for Jesus to become more like us, but the other way around.

So today is not about anticipating when Christ *will be* King: the festival isn't called *Christ the Future King Sunday* or *Eventual Reign of Christ Sunday*. If we want to know when the reign of Christ will begin, Jesus says, look behind you: the starting line is way back there. When Jesus gathers the nations, it's not the beginning of the kingdom, it's a revelation that he has been king all along, whether people realized it or not, whether they recognized him or not, whether they were obedient to his commands or not. The book of Hebrews tells us to show hospitality because we might be entertaining angels without know it; but Matthew assures us that we *are* feeding and visiting and caring for Jesus when we do those things for anyone, since we all bear God's image.

When God lived among us, Jesus fed the hungry, offered living water, welcomed strangers, healed the sick, and extended mercy. He showed us what living in his kingdom was supposed to look like: not him finally getting the honor and wealth and power of one of our earthly kings, but us being his subjects by washing each other's feet like he did. Acting out that care for other people is how we live in God's kingdom now; it's how we live in loyalty to Christ, whose spirit lives in all those whom we encounter. So, we can't love Jesus more than we love other people; loving other people—in concrete acts of compassion and service—that is how we love Jesus, who is not an idea, an ideal, or a future king, but God living in and among us now. The sheep and goats may have been unaware of who and how they were serving, but we are not. May we crown the one whom we call King by loving those whom he calls beloved.