

Sermon | Christ the King

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Matthew 25:31-46 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | November 26, 2023

Today we've come to the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar. At the end of WW1, Pope Pius XI instituted the feast of Christ the King to affirm the kingship of God in a world where secular ultra-nationalism was growing. This relatively new feast is today observed on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. So, today is the grand ending of the church calendar as we too celebrate the feast of Christ the King.

But what does the idea of 'king' mean to us? What images conjure up in our mind when we think of a king? In the ancient near eastern cultures there was one image that was constantly used to understand kingship. This was the image of a shepherd. A king was time and again called a shepherd.

Today's reading from the book of Ezekiel is excerpted from a passage that begins with line: "Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel." The 'mortal' here is Ezekiel who is living in Babylonian exile, and he is instructed to prophecy against the shepherds of Israel—not to the actual shepherds whose occupation was to tend and rear sheep, but to the symbolic shepherds of Israel-- the kings of Israel.

God is annoyed at those kings of Israel. He accuses them of failing to do their job. "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep." God accuses them of completely ignoring the welfare of the people. He says, "you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them." It was because the kings failed to do their job, that the people are now in exile.

After condemning the past kings or shepherds of Israel, God tells Ezekiel that from now on he himself will be the shepherd of his people-- implying that God will be king

to them. As king/shepherd God tells of a long list of things he intends to do. It's a pretty long to-do list. I will search for my sheep and will seek them out; I will rescue them from all places; I will gather them; I will feed them; I will make them lie down; I will seek the lost; I will bring back the strayed; and I will bind up the injured.

Searching, seeking, feeding, and taking care is not a job profile that I would have associated with a king. But that precisely is what God is saying about his kingship in Ezekiel.

As we celebrate the Kingship of God this Sunday, we need to remember that God's kingship is not about an authoritarian rule, but about a compassionate and caretaking shepherd. The God who was concerned of the welfare of his people in Ezekiel's time, is the same God of compassion today. To anyone who has ever felt like the people in exile- lost, hurt, tired, and weak, to all of them the promise of God the shepherd remains. God will search and seek us out. That is what God's kingship means. One who cares for and tends to people's needs.

If God is the King, then he is a shepherd. If he is a shepherd, he cares. It's the same idea that made the composer of Psalm 23 sing out, "The Lord is my Shepherd." This is the king we need; and fortunately, this is the king we have.

All that sounds great! God as king is nice and caring. But let us not take this lightly. Because this Shepherd-King's job extends to providing justice as a judge as well. God says: "I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goat." And he tells the stronger animals in the flock "you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and

they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep." Just because God is a King doesn't mean God will not hold people accountable for their actions. Flourishing at the expense of harming others will have consequences.

Today's gospel passage agrees with Ezekiel that judging is part of the God's kingship. The gospel writes: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats..."

But on what criteria will the King Christ judge?

The King judges based on how the King is treated. If one is good to the King, the King is good to them. And if one is not good to the King, the King is not good either. Seems like a fair principle!

To those whom Jesus rewards and calls righteous he says: I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me. You treated me well. You took good care of the King.

And the righteous would be surprised at this. When did they ever find Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison? And when did they ever take care of this King. "Lord, when did we do these things to you?" And the King would respond: whenever you have served the weak, the needy, and those considered the least, you have done it to me.

We serve Christ the King by seeing this King in the lives of those in need. If we miss on this fundamental service to God, everything else we do in God's name is meaningless. Earlier in the gospel Jesus says: "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

Today's scriptures transform one's understanding of what it means to be a King and what it means to serve a King. For God to be our king, is for God to be our loving shepherd. One who cares for us and provides justice to the weak. For us to serve God the king, is to see that King in the lives of those in need around us.

As we come to end of this liturgical year and look forward to the season of Advent, may Christ's kingly and gracious reign keep us and preserve us. Amen.