

Inherit the Kin-dom

Matthew 25:31-46

Reign of Christ Sunday/ 21st November 2021

Today is the culmination of the church year, which began on the First Sunday of Advent in 2020. The liturgical calendar orders time based upon the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It starts with his advent or coming, continues through his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, then on to Pentecost, and eventually leads to the Reign of Christ. Everything in Jesus's life leads to what this day signifies.

Originally known as the Feast of Christ the King, the significance of this day is sometimes lost on us. The reference to a king might make us uncomfortable. The hymns for this day are full of king language, which might not speak to us today. Americans, of course, did away with monarchies a long time ago. To refer to Christ as King feels a bit odd for us as Americans. We try to make it more accessible by calling it the Reign of Christ Sunday, but even this word is problematic. We don't like the thought of anyone reigning over us. To be honest, sometimes we don't know what to make of this Sunday—including preachers. It certainly doesn't rank up there with Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost. It's actually a late addition to the calendar.

The Feast of Christ Sunday was first instituted by Pope Pius XI (1857-1939) in 1925 as a way for the Church to counter the destructive forces of nationalism, fascism, and the totalitarian claims of Nazi ideologies spreading throughout Europe.¹ The feast day was placed in the Roman Catholic calendar at the end of October to compete with the Protestant celebration Reformation Sunday. During the ecumenical movement in the 1960s, it was placed where it is today on the Sunday before Advent. In time, many Protestant denominations added it to their calendars.

Prayers for this day speak of Jesus' "sovereignty over every age and nation" and ask that "we may be the subject of [God's] dominion and receive the inheritance of your kingdom."² Jesus as king or monarch might feel odd or strange when placed beside the image of Jesus born in a manger, meek and mild. My good friend, Professor Ian Bradley, who taught pastoral theology at the University of St. Andrews, writes in *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy*, "Previous ages have perhaps leaned too far in depicting and imagining Jesus Christ as a worldly emperor clad in purple robes and have overemphasized his regal power and triumph. We need to be careful not to lean too much the other way and overemphasize his humility and marginality at the expense of his majesty."³ We need to hold these images in tension. Not either-or, but both-and.

The Reign of Christ Sunday affirms the majesty, the royalty of Jesus, our servant king, descendent of David the shepherd-king who is the sovereign of the universe enthroned with God and the Spirit, who reigns over our lives with benign power, justice, and grace. It is this image of Jesus that one often finds in many Byzantine churches throughout Turkey and Greece. In brilliantly rich mosaics on the inside of their domes, we see the image of Christ Almighty, *Christos Pantocrator*, the one who reigns over all God's people living and worshipping *under* the dome of God's benevolent care, where all the sheep and the goats dwell

together. And there's a theological rationale for the predominance of this image. In Greek culture and later in the Byzantine Empire, the name given to the sovereign or king was *Basileus*. The term is related to the word *basilica*, which was originally not a name given to a type of a church building but to the building where the royal forum of the Roman emperor gathered. Only later did Roman basilicas become places where Christians gathered to worship. It's inside the domes of these basilicas that we find the depictions of *Christos Pantocrator*.

The words *basileus* and *basilica* are relevant here because the Gospel writers used a similar Greek word to convey the core message of Jesus' ministry. Jesus came preaching and embodying and offering to us the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the empire of God, or, in Greek, the *basileia tou theou*. All the parables of the kingdom of God—the *basileia tou theou*—including the parable of the sheep and goats, are about Jesus announcing the good news of God's reign over all the earth, the God who rules with generosity and grace, justice, and joy, who rules in extravagant, unconventional, startling ways. In the realm of God, we experience life in the world the way it is supposed to be; we see God's intent for creation, glimpse God's hope for all the people who live under the dome of Christ's benevolent reign where the "last shall be the first" (Matthew 20:16). God's kingdom or realm or kin-dom is like a dome that covers our lives, and the life Jesus calls you and me to is different from life outside, beyond that dome. Jesus commissions us to announce the good news of God's reign and extend the reach of God's reign, to advance the kingdom of justice and equity, to help realize, fulfill, embody the realm of God. Jesus calls the church to expand the dome by inviting all people to live in God's realm so that all might come to enjoy the benefits of living under the dome.

The parable of the sheep and goats begins as a victory hymn to Christ set in the future, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory..." (Matthew 25:31). It's the reason why this text is chosen for today. This is Jesus' parting lesson, the final moment of his teaching ministry. Jesus as King enthroned in glory, sees waves of humanity before him, and he separates the "sheep" from the "goats," which is what a good shepherd does. Now, we must be careful with this text. We need to see it as a parable and not take it literally. Many often hear this text as a conventional morality tale—those who do good deeds are rewarded, and those who do not are punished. Therefore, we should all try to be sheep instead of goats. That would be a surface reading of the text. Is this all that the parable is saying to us? If so, how exactly does a goat become a sheep? Goats are goats. Sheep are sheep. A goat cannot choose to become a sheep. If that's all this story is about, if that's what Jesus' judgment is about, there's nothing unique here; similar kinds of teaching may be found in the religious literature of many cultures.

There's something more here. Did you notice that both the sheep and the goats are judged? The "twist in this parable is that the sheep had no idea whatsoever that, in their compassion toward people in need, they were providing ministry to the Son of Man, and, likewise, the goats had not a clue that, in their indifference, they were, in fact, neglecting the Lord of all the nations." Both groups are stunned. The surprising reply is that whenever they acted—or failed to act—compassionately "to one of the least of these who are members of my family" (Matthew 25:40), they did so to Jesus Christ.⁴

And so, Jesus sends his church out to the world on a vital mission of *compassion*—to bear witness to God's good news indiscriminately. The "good news of the kingdom will be

proclaimed will be proclaimed throughout the world,” Jesus said, “as a testimony to all the nations” (Matthew 24: 14).

The Reign of Christ Sunday points us forward, not toward the world as it is, but the world as it shall be when the least are cared for because the least bear the image of Christ. Compassion for the least, for the most vulnerable among us. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6: 10). This Sunday points us forward toward the world the Spirit is groaning to create in us and the world the Spirit is groaning to create through us and the world the Spirit is groaning to create for us. It points us toward the goal of history, its purpose, and the purpose of lives—lives fulfilled when they are in service to the least among us. It’s a world where the people of the world dwell in God’s kin-dom, a place of justice and compassion, a place that resounds with the deafening praise of the nations.

Now, I can pretty much guess what you might be thinking. This all sounds like one gigantic fantasy, wishful thinking. An illusion. Delusional. *You know those Christians, so out of touch with the real world.*

Perhaps.

It’s easy to feel discouraged given the lack of compassion in the world these days, when justice is denied, when fascist and nationalist ideologies are on the rise again, where the struggle to dismantle racism in the church and society feels endless. It’s easy to feel discouraged and depressed, with the prospect of meaningful change so far off in the future, if not impossible, given human nature.

But if we trust in God’s sovereign, benevolent rule of our lives, that God’s kin-dom is both here and is on the way, if we claim this as the foundation of our trust and hope, that is, God’s sovereign rule over our lives, there is cause for hope and praise and thanksgiving. When we have confidence that someone is in charge over the universe, one who reigns with benign power, justice, and grace, when we can trust that despite whatever hardships, challenges, injustices, difficulties, anxieties, worry, and pain we are facing, in the end, as the mystic Julian of Norwich (1343-c.1416) discovered in one of her visions and later wrote, “But all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.”⁵

God is in charge, which means we don’t have to be. When we know this, when we remember this, as the Holy Spirit reminds us again and again (because we often forget or get discouraged), we can be at rest and peace and discover renewed energy to give ourselves to each other with compassion. When we stop worrying about the future because we know the future is in God’s hands, something remarkable happens—we are free to face the present and free to be present to the needs of the people around us, free to be compassionate and kind and giving. We’re free to offer our hearts, our lives, to God with gratitude, with thanks and praise.



Early 6th-century mosaic, Church of St. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy.

¹ *Quas Primas* (Latin: *In the first*) was an encyclical of Pope Pius XI. Promulgated on December 11, 1925, it introduced the Feast of Christ the King. The encyclical summarizes both the Old Testament and the New Testament teaching on the kingship of Christ. Pope Pius XI took as his papal motto: “Christ’s peace in Christ’s kingdom.”

² Recommended by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy and recommended by the Joint Liturgical Group of the Revised Common Lectionary. Cited in Ian Bradley, *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2002), 43.

³ Bradley, 43

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 284.

⁵ In 1373, seriously ill and convinced she was close to death, the 30-year-old Julian received a series of visions, or 'shewings', of the Passion of Christ. Julian’s visions were later published *Revelations of Divine Love*.