



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Scripture Passages: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 & Matthew 25:31-46

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The rhythm of the church year with all its feasts – moveable and unmovable – and all its seasons is for Anglicans is what we call the Christological cycle – It's the way we make time sacred. We mark the temporal year with sacred reminders of the events of Jesus' life and we divide the year up into seasons and particular days within those seasons – it begins with Advent starting next week – officially the beginning of the church year actually – then Epiphany, then Lent, then Easter then Pentecost, then ordinary time for a while – and all of these seasons punctuated by particular Saint's Days and days like today: the Reign of Christ. And there are scripture readings attached to all of these seasons and days.

This rhythm helps us to again and again touch the centre of our faith. The core of our beliefs. And remember to ourselves – both what we believe and why we believe it.

And you and I know that that's not easy actually. Faith, like other intangibles like love, is not simple to take out and examine and in any kind of logical or rational way. But does that mean that it's less valid than an empirically verifiable fact? I don't think so. Simply because human beings aren't made that way. We have been blessed with possessing ways of knowing that are beyond words, beyond concrete demonstration by a stacking up of facts. And yet words are important.

Take today. Today in this cycle I've just described of the church year is the feast of the reign of Christ: the Sunday that we reflect on the biblical teaching that Jesus is Lord of all.

But weirdly, today's Gospel reading – is a strange or even a threatening way to come at the subject, . . . on the face of it.

So, I'm going to suggest a different emphasis in reading this parable. Because again, I think we might have missed something important in our traditional reading of the emphasis on the judgement of the goats. Because what's interesting here is that although I'd not very much relish the idea of being on the goat side of things, the goat reaction to the king is exactly the same as the sheep. They ask the same three questions: "But Lord, when was it?"; "When was it?"; "When was it?" And the Lord answers three times in the positive and three times in the negative. But what's interesting is both the goats and the sheep are equally surprised at the same thing.

Though each has an answer for their actions – the merciful to inherit the riches of eternal life and the unmerciful to be relegated to eternal punishment, they both miss something very important.

They miss, . . . where Jesus is standing – or more accurately, who he's standing with; who he's caring for; who he's protecting and who he expects his followers to stand with, care for and protect. That's kind of the point for this atypical king. And both groups are surprised because that's not what they expect of a King. Both groups. Equally.

Now that's interesting. Because it sounds here as if Jesus' kingship is not defined by our concepts of kingship. That might give us a clue as to why this day is important. Because you could be forgiven for thinking that the kingship of Christ might seem an arcane or outmoded thing to celebrate in our world. Maybe - apart from our avid interest in watching the Crown on Netflix of course!

But actually not. In fact, I believe it's probably about the most relevant and important thing we can say about Jesus. Let me tell you why.

Now, in order to understand what this is all about, you have to understand why the feast was introduced – because it's a relatively young feast of the church. So, in the days after the end of World War I, Pope Pius XI, when the dust and smoke of that great conflagration had settled, looked around our world – as you do if you're a world leader and what he saw did not delight his soul.

He saw that while the war was technically over, there still was no true peace. He saw the rise of class warfare. He saw nationalism raise its ugly head. He saw what looked like intractable prejudice and racial and cultural violence. Sounding a bit familiar?

And of course, he was deeply troubled. And lamented all of this but at the same time was absolutely sure that the way to answer all this unrest – and correct this un-peace or anti-peace, . . . was to introduce this feast of the church – the feast of Christ the King or the Kingship of Christ. Now I don't know about you, but again, on the face of it, it doesn't seem very effective does it?

That is until you get what he was thinking. You see he wanted to remind believers – and non-believers alike - that true peace, constructive, productive, satisfyingly heart-deep peace can only be found in Jesus as the "Prince of Peace".

He wrote these words: "For Jesus Christ reigns over the minds of individuals by His teachings, in their hearts by His love, in each one's life by the living according to His law and the imitating of His example."

And indeed, the world would be a much better place if we could all do that.

That all sounds great. But there's more because it still doesn't get to the pretty profound point that he was really making. That's a deeper and a little more radical.

It's something that allows us to look at Jesus, a small- town carpenter and preacher from 2000 years ago, and see in him not only the saviour of the world but the saviour of our souls – pretty big claims.

We can see this because of something our Jewish siblings introduced to the world, something that Jesus taught and lived out and died and rose for; something that has become a part of our modern world; the idea that the true leader, the true king, is the one who serves, the one who suffers for his people.

The Jewish idea of a king was that the king ruled under God, not as God or equal to God. The Jewish idea was that the king was responsible to God and bore a sacred responsibility for his subjects. This idea was taken further by the prophets, and was brought to beautiful, poetic form in particular by the words of the prophet Isaiah, who saw the king, the messiah as the one who suffers on behalf of his people, as a suffering servant.

And as Christians, we believe that Jesus was the incarnation of that idea - Jesus said things like the true leader is the one who serves others. The one who takes up the burdens of others is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Just remember the stories – remember in the upper room, when he got down on his knees and washed the disciples' feet? Jesus showed what true leadership, true kingship, is about: the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Think about his interaction with the woman at the well – so wise and compassionate – telling her who she was in the eyes of God and to live her life seeing herself as God saw her: as a loved and precious child of God – and not the sum of all the things she'd done wrong in her life.

Think about how Jesus healed and welcomed and brought into the centre of life, people – women, children, the lost and the least. Think of how he brought restoration and the hope of a new life in those stories. How a man, because Jesus told him he was forgiven, could get up from his mat – a symbol of a life of paralysis and begin to walk again, begin to hope again.

He gave life back to the people he healed and restored and forgave.

So, I have to say that I'm on board with that kind of kingship. Because this is no earthbound King – no made up regal entity; no human construct. This is a heavenly king, a selfless king, a king who understands that sacrifice is the particular quality of divine kingship. This is a king who stands with people not over people; who protects and cares for his people.

That's a pretty counter cultural way of thinking about kingship. It's challenging. It's unsettling. It's profound.

So we celebrate Christ the King today, not because of his awesomeness, but because of his humility; not because of his power, but because of his compassion and mercy and healing; not because of his triumph, but because of his suffering; and not because he waves a magic wand to take away our pain, but because he shows us the content of discipleship: the way to live and to be with each other and to find hope and possibility and compassion and love for our fellow human beings every day.

See now it begins to make sense doesn't it? How this Pope thought that celebrating Jesus' kingship could be the answer to all our problems.

So how does that work for us? Because I'm pretty convinced that he was right. As I look out at our world today, I still see violence of all kinds – violent and nationalistic words spoken by world leaders – people who frankly, should know better -- and the bitter conflict of war, oppression and torture. I see the violence we do to the earth and to each other with our willful pursuit of profit, comfort and sheer greed over protection and care for the created world and its people. And I know that I need the kind of leadership of Christ the king in my heart to combat this creeping evil.

And we don't have to go even that far to find our need of a servant king: poverty lives on our front door – even in Ontario – even in Niagara – even if it's hidden. And it's not merely tangible poverty, it's a poverty of spirit, of imagination to seek solutions. And so I know that I need the kingship of the one who broke five loaves and two fish and fed a multitude. I need that king in my heart and head to keep my heart soft and generous and my head expansive with Gospel and kingdom possibilities.

And what does it mean personally perhaps even today to say that Christ is King? Well, as I experience pain and loss – as I experience life and death – of those dear ones around me or even the life and death of hopes and dreams - I know I need the King of love to take up residence in my heart and my head to remind me that although my grief is the price I pay for having loved deeply, because I believe in the Resurrected One, I can also have hope of a rising again; of a new life – different from the old, but still a beautiful life.

I also think there is a constancy, a certain hope that our faith, that this kingship also implies. Our belief in Jesus Christ hums along as the foundation

to our lives. It's always there. If I'm having a hard time believing and I'm struggling with doubt – Jesus still reigns. If I'm having a challenging time with my fellow Christians – experiencing conflict and anger – Jesus still reigns. If I am struggling with isolation or loneliness because of this pandemic – Jesus still reigns.

You get the point. Jesus still reigns. He is the great constant. The touchstone. The unchanging, bedrock, foundational love of God is always waiting for me – to wrap itself around me and comfort, protect and give me strength for whatever I have to face. As the hymn says, “Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth it's successive journies run, . . .”

So maybe this day isn't so arcane nor so strange as it seems. Maybe, in fact it is important, and foundational instead. And maybe it's a point of light in what can seem a dark time. I think it's all this that I'm saying when I confess that Jesus is Lord in my life; in the church's life - that God is King in every corner of this world.

So. There you have it. The Reign of Christ – a strange day for these times? Or maybe a crucial day for these times.

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