

Sermon for Sunday, November 26, 2017

Shepherd King

Today we're celebrating Christ the King Sunday. This is a newer addition to our liturgical calendar so it deserves a little explanation.

On December 11, 1925, Pope Pius XI wrote an encyclical—encyclicals are letters that a Pope writes when some kind of upheaval is going on in society—through the encyclical the Pope uses Catholic doctrine to address the issue. In 1925, Pope Pius wrote about the Lordship of Christ. Because in the wake of World War I there was still instability and peace seemed illusive. Through his writing Pius instituted what is now known as Christ the King Sunday. A Sunday where we, as the church, proclaim that our true King is Jesus Christ, he alone is the prince of peace—and by making that declaration—we are altering the way we live in the world.

While Christ the King Sunday was originally celebrated on the Sunday before All Saints in October, it was changed in 1969 to the last day of the liturgical year—because by celebrating it today, we have an opportunity to look back on the year we've just celebrated in order to look for ways where we experienced the reign and Lordship of Christ, and then to look forward, and start to prepare for the new year with expectant hope as we begin Advent next Sunday.

But before we can look back at the year, there are two questions we need to answer, what kind of king do we serve? And what does it mean to live in God's kingdom?

In our Old Testament text today we get our first answer. While we have read verses 11-16 and 20-24—we're going to add verse 1-6—because something has happened which has led God to step in and act. In verse 1 God speaks to Ezekiel saying

“Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.”

In the Old Testament, The title of shepherd is a common metaphor for kings or political leaders. According to this passage, the shepherds-or kings-have failed—instead of feeding their sheep the shepherds have been feeding themselves and getting fat. Instead of ensuring the safety of their sheep they've clothed themselves with the wool of the sheep. They've failed to strengthen the weak, to heal the sick or to bind up the injured—the shepherds have allowed sheep to wander off and haven't bothered to look for the lost. In fact, instead of tending and caring for those entrusted into their care, the shepherds have turned the sheep into prey.

When the story references that the flock has been scattered all over the face of the earth—there's a reference to the fact that the Israelite people have been taken as prisoners of war. it was the kings—those in power—who had allowed it to happen...

Then we hear the promise that God makes—"I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep, I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down...I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..."

It's a powerful promise...But then we get this last line: "I will feed them with justice"...At first it sounds incredibly out of place...

But Kings were called to exercise their power, not to ensure their own safety and comfort, but to use their influence in a way that brought justice and equity for all of their people.

What if, "to be fed with justice" means that those who are marginalized, those who are somehow deemed weaker or who are in a vulnerable situation--they aren't taken advantage of, exploited or forced to stay in their condition—instead, God seeks them out, God cares for them by bringing them in and establishing a kingdom where all are equal.

What kind of king do we serve? We serve a true shepherd—one who seeks out every last person, who brings back the strayed, binds up wounds, strengthens the weak and feeds them with justice...

What does it mean to live in God's kingdom?

For this, we need to revisit our New Testament text...

I really wish, that the New Testament reading for today was John's gospel where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."

But instead, our New Testament text comes from Matthew and it's filled with apocalyptic and slightly frightening imagery.

Jesus tells this parable, about when the Son of Man comes in glory—how the sheep will be separated from the goats—the sheep on the right and the goats on the left.

The sheep are shocked as the Son of Man turns to them and says "come, you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"...For 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."

The goats go through the same litany only this time they hear that they have failed to do something.

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

Both groups ask the same question: when did we see you hungry, thirsty, or as a stranger in need of welcome—when did we see you naked or sick or in prison?

But there's a flaw in the question...They ask "When did we see you" the king in need. It's as though the goats are saying, "Well, king, if we had known it was you we totally would have helped!"

But the question misses the point...It's not about who is lost and in need of rescue...it's not about who is hungry or thirsty...it's not about who is naked, or sick, or in prison...It's about what motivated their actions.

The King welcomed the sheep, not because they knew that they were helping the king, but because they had witnessed someone in need and responded with genuine compassion and care.

What does it mean to live in God's kingdom?

The text in Matthew makes it clear--If we declare that Jesus Christ is King, the shepherd King who seeks the lost, who brings back those who have strayed, who binds up the injured, and strengthens the weak, who feeds us with justice—if this is our king—then as members of Christ's kingdom we are called to do the same thing. To feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick and visit those who are in prison—regardless of who they are.

Next week, we will begin the season of Advent and start a new year. So it seems fitting to look back a little bit—to see where we as Ladue Chapel have participated in proclaiming the Reign of Christ the King.

Now I'm sure we can all make our own lists—but here's what I've witnessed.

This past year, our food bank volunteers have continued the ministry of driving to Schnuck's stores, picking up produce, bread, milk and other items and bringing them back to the little white building in our parking lot. Through their tireless and very quiet efforts—they have helped to ensure that people throughout St. Louis have received the necessary food they need.

Last summer, 24 high school students participated in Urban Plunge—where they not only learned about the needs in our community but experienced how small actions matter—together they assembled brown bag lunches and care kits which were distributed to people who are experiencing homelessness.

Our deacons have continued to provide support through phone calls, flower deliveries and cards. They have conducted quiet ministry that has provided comfort for the sick, those who are grieving and our members who are homebound.

We have teams who partner with concordance academy and accompany returning citizens—working with them as they look for employment and housing. But also our teams provide friendship and a network of support.

Cleanup buckets have been assembled and distributed by PDA, casseroles made and delivered, cards written and mailed, Sunday school lessons prepped and taught, bulletins have been distributed, bagels have been set out and cookies baked.

From the small and unseen to the large and visible—you, the members of Ladue Chapel have worked to proclaim the reign of Christ, here within our walls, in our community of St. Louis and across the country.

But it doesn't stop there.

As we prepare to start a new year, these two texts beg us to ask the question: If Christ, our Shepherd King, has vowed to seek and rescue the lost, to bind up the injured and to feed them with justice—how are we, how are you going to live in a way that proclaims that good news to others?

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

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