Christ the King A 2026 Matthew 25:31-46

The worst thing I ever agreed to do was to serve as treasurer of my college sorority. Badgering your best friends for money is not much fun. And unfortunately, I did have to do that sometimes. We had a few sisters who, because of financial hardship, or at least inexperience managing money, never seemed to pay their dues on time, even if they were very consistent in attending meetings, activities, and service projects. We had the opposite problem as well: some sisters always wrote their checks on time, but they weren't as diligent about participation. Ideally, everyone would meet both their financial and time commitments, and most did, but of those who were deficient one way or the other…I'm sure I don't need to tell you who the national organization considered to be members in good standing and who they put on probation. That is just one more example of what we mean when we say that our ways are not the same as God's ways.

Today, Christ the King Sunday, marks the end of the church year. Jesus casts a future vision of himself as a king sitting in judgment, like a shepherd, which was how ancient rulers often portrayed themselves. That language resonated in the first century because the people were used to living under the rule of kings and emperors. It may sound antiquated to us, but before we dismiss it as outdated or irrelevant, we should remember that the church did not celebrate the feast of Christ the King in the earliest days of the church, or even in medieval times, which is what I usually think of when I think of kings and kingdoms. In fact, this day only made it onto the liturgical calendar 100 years ago, as a response to the rise of fascism and nationalism between the two World Wars. The kingdom that Jesus describes stands in stark contrast to the values and practices of earthly kingdoms and other human governments.

All throughout Matthew's gospel, we find a concern for who is included in the fellowship of faith, and who is not. We have deduced that most of Matthew's community was culturally Jewish and were learning to welcoming gentiles who followed Jesus but didn't follow Jewish practices. Matthew's gospel therefore gives us magi: the first to honor Jesus as king of the Jews, but foreigners in terms of their citizenship and religion. Matthew shows us Roman centurions, Canaanite women, and characters who would have been considered outsiders but who turn out to be people of extraordinary faith and insight—able to see Jesus as the holy One of God while those who might have been expected to recognize his authority did not.

Today's passage also portrays insiders and outsiders, sheep who are found in the shepherd-king's favor and goats who are not; but the dividing line isn't drawn the way human societies usually draw it. Jesus says that all the nations are gathered before him—not any one nation in particular. So it's not a person's nationality that ensures them a place in the kingdom. Nor does it seem to be their belief system: those at the king's left hand still call him "Lord" and they imply that their intent was to serve him—they just did not recognize their opportunity to do so. For all the ways that human societies categorize people—by nationality, ethnicity, gender, creed—the only difference that the King cares about is action: what people do, or, even more so, don't do.

Yet, the good and faithful servants are not those who have done right by the king but those who have cared for the least of his siblings: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. Since Jesus is no longer with us in physical form, the practical way we serve him is by serving his loved ones who are in some kind of need. What makes that service a particularly selfless act is that the needy are really not in any position to return the service that is done for them. That is at least part of what those on the left hand side missed: they would have been willing to help the king had they seen king in any of those situations, because the king could have rewarded them. They could see people in need around them; they just did not see a person to help who could have helped them back. However, the king expected his subjects to selflessly treat everyone as if they were the king himself.

This story includes quite a lot more judgement than we're used to or that we're probably comfortable with. Its intention is not that we fall into dread or despair, worrying that we're going to end up on the goat side. And if we are gleefully locating ourselves in this story as the sheep, and think we have nothing to learn here…well, I doubt Jesus would agree. We could cling to our Lutheran understanding of being simultaneously saint and sinner and see our daily struggle between being sheep and being goats, and we might not be too far off there. But what if, instead of projecting this scene into the eternal future, we could ask what difference it makes to us now.

We don't know when Jesus will come in majesty, but we know that when Jesus came in history, he taught us to act with compassion towards those in need, because he acted with compassion towards those in need. We could wait until the redemption of all things, as if what we do in the meantime in inconsequential, or we could do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven, so that the kingdom comes now, in this life, not just the next. We could be subjects of Christ the King now, by *acting* as subjects of Christ the King, because we know what the kingdom of heaven looks like: it looks like the hungry being fed and the stranger being welcomed and the sick being cared for and the imprisoned being visited.

I can't make this passage sound any nicer or less judgmental: it simply is a tough text, requiring our accountability. But before we dread being left out in the future, we might ask whether we're leaving *ourselves* out of the kingdom in the *present* if we're not actively engaging in Christ's work of compassion. We can help the kingdom break into this world by doing the work of the kingdom that Jesus prioritized, but not in order to get ourselves into the sheep line. We know our works don't save us, but they might save someone else. We don't feed the hungry, care for the sick, or visit the imprisoned to get us into God's good graces, we feed the hungry because they're hungry, and we take care of the sick because they're sick. It's not what God needs from us, it's what our neighbor needs from us. The kingdom for which we pray is a place where everyone's needs are met.

Each day we have the opportunity to live a little more fully into God's kingdom by not just saying Christ is King, but acting like his subjects, following Jesus, not the world, in how we live. We don't have to hope we'll one day be invited; we're already called to live there now. Let's answer the King's invitation.