

Christ the King – Cycle A

Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. We recognize that Christ is our King. When you think about a king, you usually think of England or perhaps other countries in more medieval times. Kings seem to be all powerful; sometimes evil, sometimes nice; but in any case someone you paid close attention to and treated with upmost respect. Jesus redefined kingship in his time. Because in Jesus' time, Kings were someone to be feared and generally kings seemed determined to conquer all of their neighbors. We know that the Israelites were looking for a conquering king when they heard that Jesus could be their Messiah. They wanted someone to conquer the Romans who occupied their land. Jesus redefined kingship in his time. Jesus was king but he led by protecting those on the fringe of society. Jesus led by giving a voice to those most vulnerable.

YOU must now give a voice to those most vulnerable in our society. By virtue of our baptism we are commissioned into Jesus' ministries of Priest, Prophet, and King. A few weeks ago, I helped Fr. John with the baptism of two young ones. Fr. John handled the water and I handled the oil. Before anointing the two, I spoke the words that these two young ones were to be anointed priest, prophet, and king. We are anointed because WE ARE CHRIST for the entire world.

- We are a priest because we have to minister to everyone with love
- We are prophets because we have to bear witness to the gospel and
- We are Kings because we must take responsibility for the transformation of our society as stewards of Christ's kingship.

In the reading from Ezekiel, the prophet gives us an idea of what it means to be a prophet. The prophet Ezekiel talks about God judging between one sheep and another. Jesus talks about the same thing in the gospel. Either way, it sounds pretty serious and very convicting of how God would judge us because there are not many people who feel worthy of God's favor.

I think I would rather be judged by Judge Judy. Have you seen that show on TV? Judge Judy plaintiffs come in with a complaint against their ex-boyfriend who won't pay back the \$500 they loaned them for bail money. I mean, these people have more problems other than the \$500. Well, Judge Judy will eventually get to the legal standing on that supposed loan for bail money. But first Judge Judy wants to judge them on their moral character. She will ask them why they don't have a job but still have 3 babies at home. Instead of going right to the legal issue on the \$500, Judge Judy will want to know why the plaintiff and the defendant decided to live together and have kids without getting married.

While we may not see the connection between the \$500 loan and their moral character, it is entertaining to watch. Jesus was interested in people's moral character more than the law too. Many times the Pharisees and Sadducees wanted to test Jesus on the law of the land. They would catch Jesus' followers grabbing some grain to eat on the Sabbath or Jesus healing the sick on the Sabbath. Jesus would not deny that he broke these written laws but he would upset their legal logic with a higher law, the law that is written on our

hearts. The law on our hearts was placed there by God to help us; guide us to reach out to others through love rather than a sense of entitlement or obligation. Through Ezekiel, God says he will pasture his sheep; I will give them rest; bring back the strays; and heal the sick. However, God did not have kind words for what he called the “strong and the sleek.”

Think about the economic struggles we are all facing right now. I have been hearing more and more about people losing their jobs, having difficulties finding work with adequate benefits, or having difficulties paying the mortgage or rent. On the one hand, the “strong and the sleek” may want to enforce the terms of the mortgage or rent agreement which could place undue burdens on the family. The family may have to decide between food and paying the rent. The family may have to lose their home and move into their relatives’ house putting an undue burden on everyone. On the other hand, the landlord or mortgage company could put aside economics for once to enforce the law on their heart. They could hold the rent steady for awhile; they could renegotiate the terms of the mortgage to tide the family over for awhile. One of our parishioners here told me that he held the rent steady even when cost was increasing for him. It was more important to him that the family found some comfort in maintaining their residence in hard economic times. These actions could save a marriage, they could save a family. Families in hard times sometimes cannot handle the pressure and they end up in divorce or children act out and find themselves in trouble with the law. But the landlord is satisfied that he could help God shepherd the sheep who found themselves scattered when it was cloudy and dark. The landlord could afford one less vacation in sun if the troubled family could enjoy a ray of sunshine in their lives.

The beautiful thing about Christians who give to others through God’s law, the law of the heart, is that they do so without expectations of return. They generally don’t even want a pat on the back. It’s just the right thing to do. That is the way Jesus wants us to give. We give to others because it has become second nature. We don’t think we get to heaven by tallying up the good deeds throughout our life. We get to heaven by the changing of our heart. That’s a beautiful image of salvation!

It’s an interesting contrast in the gospel reading. You have two groups who are totally surprised about the judgment from Jesus. The first group is offered an inheritance in the kingdom of God prepared from the foundation of the world because they gave Jesus food, drink, welcome, clothes, care, and visits in prison. They were totally surprised because they asked Jesus, “when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?” They just thought they were helping their neighbor; just doing the right thing. They weren’t concerned about tallying up points for heaven. They had a change of heart. The other group was equally surprised. This group was being dispatched to the devil because they did not give Jesus food, drink, welcome, clothes, care, or visits in prison. In their confusion they asked Jesus, “when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?” And of course, we know what Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” The second group did not know that God was watching when they

bypassed their neighbor in need. If they thought God was watching, they would have made an effort to help.

You give even when no one is watching. You help even when you cannot be repaid. You do what Jesus taught us – you ask the recipient to “pay it forward.” To “pay it forward” means that I won’t necessarily repay you for the good deed, but I will do a good deed for someone in my future who needs help. Jesus wants us to “pay it forward.” God has given us everything; Jesus has given us salvation through his sacrifice. Jesus doesn’t want us to pay him, that would be impossible. Jesus wants us to “pay it forward” to our neighbor who is hungry, sick, lonely, or thirsty.

Benjamin Franklin in 1784 was the first one to coin the concept of “paying it forward” even though he didn’t use those words. I think his description of the concept is worth stating:

“I do not pretend to give such a sum; I only lend it to you. When you meet with another honest man in similar distress, you must pay me by lending this sum to him. Enjoin him to discharge the debt by a like operation when he shall be able . . . I hope this may thus go thro’ many hands before it meets with a knave who will stop its progress. This is a trick of mine for doing a great deal of good with a little money.”

Jesus went about his ministry by giving to the less fortunate; those on the fringes of his society. Jesus revealed the loving care and attentive mercy of God for this world’s least ones. Even though Jesus’ followers and others oppressed by those in power at the time wanted to make Jesus a King, Jesus didn’t want to be a king as they envisioned, he just wanted them to “pay it forward” to future generations of oppressed people.

But you know Jesus was a king.

Today we celebrate Christ the King. Jesus is king in the style and form that he defined. Jesus defined king for us to follow. The king is the servant.