

## Christ The King Sunday - Matthew 25:31-46

Kings and queens have mostly disappeared from modern, Western countries. We hear a great deal about what is happening to the Windsors, the British royal family, and it makes for good tabloid reading. I understand that with the coming visit of the Prince and princess there is to be an “upgrade” in dress among the news people who will be covering the visit. They can’t show up in sloppy clothes in order to film the royal couple. But where there are kings and queens, they are usually figureheads, useful for making inspiring remarks and opening shopping centers and sometimes even leading important social issues, but having little real power. We are more comfortable, or at least familiar, with presidents and prime ministers.

However, there remains a fascination with sovereigns. One British journalist attributes our fascination with kings and queens to the popularity of fairy tales. "Whoever heard of someone kissing a frog and it turning into a handsome senator?"

"President" Jesus just doesn't have the same ring as "King Jesus."

Like it or not, we are stuck with King Jesus. So, on this Christ the King Sunday we are given the advantageous reminder that we are subjects of a leader for whom we did **not** cast a vote, we are the subjects of an absolute sovereign whom we did not choose.

Does that sound scary? The words *absolute sovereign* bring to mind images of dungeons and royal whims and complete subservience. But keep in mind; although we did not choose this king, he chose us.

But it is still true that we don't often think of Jesus in this way, as absolute monarch, as sovereign, as judge! We think of Jesus as good friend, as redeemer, as the one who affirms us, but rarely do we think of Jesus as judge.

Yet, when we do *not* think of Jesus as judge, much is lost. Since the time of Luther, who himself had to get past the image of Jesus as angry judge to find the Jesus of redemption, we have

wanted to dwell on Jesus the man who walked among us and lived the things we live and thought the things we think. But today's scripture cannot be denied - it reminds us that Jesus reigns supreme, and is therefore ruler and judge over his entire kingdom.

In our daily lives, we are always submitting to authorities. From the official authorities, like the rules of the road and getting a traffic ticket if we don't obey them, to the TSA who can physically search us before we get on an airplane. From the authority of the press or the nightly news and even what you hear from the pulpit - everyone bows to an external authority.

The strength of an authority is that it lies outside of ourselves. Even a police officer who wields authority has authority not because of his person, but because it is granted to him by means of his place in society. Authority is not self-generated, but stands over against us because it has its own integrity. If we could relativize authority, make it our own,

make it a servant of our own wants and needs, - it would certainly be a more comfortable thing with which to live, but it would no longer be authority. Authority must stand outside of our whims and desires.

Understanding King Jesus as judge is difficult for us, because we have spent our lives "internalizing" Jesus, making him our own, making him our companion and our friend. Paul speaks about Christ "dwelling in us". He tells the Galatians about Christ "being formed in you." We are called upon as Christians to become "little Christs".

As we are steadily exposed to Jesus, we find ourselves gradually shaped by him, energized by him. It is a lifelong, subtle, gradual, but very deep process. The result has a certain integrity, a stable readiness to speak and act in certain ways - to speak out against injustice, to stand up for the down and out, to stand with the poor and outcast. And as we do these things, we build our Christian character, a sense of the world that is

different than the world. Nones vs dones

If you have done any reading about the future of the Christian church, you perhaps have seen people write about the “nones” n-o-n-e-s. These are people, mostly of the youngest adult generation, who have never had anything to do with organized religion and are not involved in it now. They have, for all practical purposes, never heard about Jesus. But in a blog posted on a number of people’s Facebook accounts I have recently read of the “dones” d-o-n-e-s. They are people who have been church active – perhaps lifelong members of a religious tradition, who are done with church. They have, for all sorts of reasons, simply “dropped out” of church.

While I can perhaps understand to some extent how a person might get tired, or angry, or frustrated with a particular congregation, or even denomination, it is frightening to me to think about people who seem to make a decision to reject their faith – to walk away from it because of some experience they

have had personally. To never have known Jesus and the work of the church is one thing, To have known Jesus and the work of the church and then to reject it, is quite another in my way of thinking.

Because we have made Jesus into this kind of “BFF” – Best Friend Forever - we have a tendency to set aside the equally true vision of King Jesus, the judge of the world. Even though we confess it in the Apostle's Creed "he will come to judge the living and the dead", the image of Jesus as judge has for the most part disappeared from Christian conversation.

By disposing of the last judgement, there is no judgment other than the one we pass upon ourselves. And of course, if it is left to you or to me, we would certainly judge ourselves and those we like as basically good - wouldn't we? We are no more deceitful than when we make judgments upon ourselves. It's not that different from the working world. When asked to evaluate your work, you do one of two things; either you judge

yourself lower than you really think you are with the thought that it will persuade the boss to respond "Oh Higgins - you're much too hard on yourself." Or else, out of a sense of survival or self-satisfaction, you rate yourself very highly to show that **you** appreciate the work you do, even if others do not! But there are often surprises when someone independent of you does the evaluating.

Once Christ's judgment has disappeared, all judgements are merely relative. Ethics becomes nothing more than using our frail conscience to shape our own actions. We lose the sense of accountability to something outside of ourselves, to something that makes demands on us that perhaps we do not want to acknowledge.

When I think about this problem of accountability, I look back to my training so many years ago in community organizing. Community organizing doesn't let anyone hide behind their faith – or blame their faith. It demands that we lose our innocence

and take seriously the power each one of us has to change things. It forced me to think about the times when in the face of problems like homelessness, racism, violence, I have thought or said "What are **they** going to do about this problem". It forced me to accountability, to say - "what am **I** going to do about this problem." Power is nothing more than the ability to act. The God we worship is an all powerful God and has given each of us the power to act against injustice. But when left to myself, it is very easy for me to rationalize this need to use my power by saying I am comfortable where I am, I really don't want to rock the boat, upset my life, upset people in the congregation and the community, maybe even run the risk of having people angry with me. But often it takes this external voice of judgement, this voice of authority, this "in my face" confrontation, to make me rethink and realign priorities.

Mere sentimentality is our great judge today because it is easier to be accountable to some fuzzy ideal or principle, usually



abstractions like justice, equality, or freedom, than it is to really commit ourselves to actually do something, to actually claim the power that is ours as Christians, and as the church, and use it.

Fortunately, it is also true that the one who is the only one in a position to judge, is also the one who embodies complete mercy.

Ask yourself: To whom am I accountable and for what?"

To be accountable to Jesus, we are accountable to a person, to an event who lived in history. He is a real being who cannot be reduced to our wants and whims. But at the same time, while **Jesus** is the *judge*, it is equally important to recognize that the **judge** is *Jesus*. Our *redeemer is our judge*. The one to whom we are accountable is also the one who forgives.

Any goodness we have is not self-generated but is a product, a response to what God has first given us. In the judgement of Christ, there is also forgiveness for our failures. We are judged by the one who knows what failure feels like.

And there lies not only our hope, but also our motivation.

*God's single will in Jesus Christ is for our salvation.* The old cliché "It is better to have tried and failed, than never to have tried at all" becomes all the more relevant when we are aware that the judge, the one who sits on the throne to evaluate our lives, is the one who laid down his life for us, who did for us that which we cannot do for ourselves, whose judgment upon us is another side of his unfathomable love for us. Amen

*God has not, Emil Brunner asserts, predestined some for blessedness and others for torment. However, this does not mean we can do whatever we want and rely on things to turn out well for us at the end.*

*Rather, in this parable Christ calls for us to be judged and make a decision. What counts is our relationship with cChrist, as shown in action. “This is not a question of whether they were abstainers or vegetarians or socialists.” In the parable, the blessed are those who have done God’s will with no thought of self-glorification. In this parable Jesus dethrones “all human securities apart from our standing with Christ.*