

Christ the King Sunday – Judy Cox

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Christ the King, or Reign of Christ Sunday, ends the Christian year, as a sort of grand finale. It's the exclamation point rounding out the story of God's Good News in Jesus that we retell together in the cycle of every year. Christ is born, Christ brings God's Good News preaching and healing, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Meanwhile, even when it looks otherwise in this already/not yet waiting time, we affirm that Christ now reigns!

“You're not the boss of me!” Have you ever said that, or maybe had someone say that to you? “You're not the boss of me!” That angry childhood phrase protests against an overreaching playmate, for example, or a bossy older sibling, trying to take over playtime. Christ the King Sunday arose in a time when, across the world, the State tried to assert its own ultimate rule over individuals, and shut down the Church; believers, then and now, together respond, if you will: “You're not the boss of us—Jesus is!” or, “Christ is King!”

But what kind of king is Jesus the Christ? Is it fitting for us as his followers angrily to assert his counter-claim, with an attitude of Christian arrogance? Let's look at today's texts to see.

In our Ephesians text we see Jesus highly exalted within the Trinity. Raised by God's great power, he is seated in the place of authority, at God's right hand. This is extreme language: *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named...* both now and forever! To underscore, not only have all things been placed under him, but he also has been made head over all things. And furthermore, he *fills all in all*—extreme rule, authority and power!

But notice that Christ does not set himself up, assert his own authority. Always the Father is the subject, the One who *raises* and *seats*, who *puts all things under* and *makes Christ head over* them all. This King doesn't put himself forward assertively. He simply IS, in right relationship with the Father of glory, Who calls and works in all things for the good.

What more can we see in our texts of this One we proclaim as King? Ezekiel portrays a Messianic ruler, *my servant David*, who rightly fulfills kingly responsibilities as a shepherd, tending his flock of sheep. Not very flattering to the King's subjects: sheep are known as silly, needy, crowd-following animals. Nor is it a glamorous job description for the ruler! Shepherding alternates between the routines of boring daily-ness, and danger from both animal predators and human thieves. Over every day hangs the heavy responsibility of providing for these clueless sheep and protecting them from their own stupidity. The owner asks a heavy reckoning from the hired shepherd, too. Any missing animal must be accounted for with all or part of its carcass. So the responsible shepherd runs to rescue the stolen sheep, even snatching the body from the jaws of the predator, or the thief's supper, rather than running away for personal safety. No wonder Jesus, describing himself as the Good Shepherd, speaks of laying down his life for the sheep! A “good” shepherd, although poorly paid, with no social status, will risk personal danger for his heedless, thankless charges—not exactly a desirable, high-profile position!

So Christ's shepherding rule over his flock, the clueless, needy people of God, reveals him as selfless, committed, courageous, and responsibly providing both nurture and protection. Like Godself as

shepherd, earlier in our Ezekiel text, he reveals God's own heart for the lost, the strayed, the injured, and the weak. He seeks them out and rescues them, and brings them to where they can be fed and watered in safety. He seeks the lost, brings back the strayed, binds up the injured, and strengthens the weak. Good news for the flock—a lot of hard work for the Shepherd-King! Though not at all proactive in Ephesians, on his own behalf, here he actively pours himself out on behalf of God's flock, God's people.

But there's more for us to learn here. This Good Shepherd/King stands in right relationship with both the Father and the Father's flock. He also shares the Father's decided opinion regarding right relationships within the herd! Look at the similarities between our Ezekiel and Matthew texts.

In Ezekiel the Lord God will bind up the injured sheep and strengthen the weak, but will *watch over* or *destroy* the fat and the strong sheep—that is, keep an eye on them, and punish them as necessary! Justice will be the food on which they are fed, and justice is required of all of them! The fat and privileged are rebuked for fouling the provisions, so that the lean have only the dregs to live on. The strong that used their advantage to *push with flank and shoulder*, and *butt at all the weak animals with their horns*, will be judged. Oppression and selfish greed, both sins of commission, are called out and condemned.

“Ouch!” we respond. It's not much of a jump to recognize us Americans as those who unheedingly hoard and foul resources that should be providing for all—or those who use their advantage to *push and butt at the weak*.

But wait, there's more! It only gets worse, more pointed, more painful, as we move to Matthew. Here Jesus, deeply grounded in the prophets, twists Ezekiel's knife. Here, too, judgment happens. But this is not only for sins of commission, is it?

Who are praised, all unsuspectingly, as those *blessed by my Father* who will *inherit the kingdom*?—those who, apparently without thought of reward, saw around them Jesus' needy *least of these who are members of my family*, and actively cared for them, like a good shepherd caring for his sheep. In fact, they cared for these *least* as such a matter of course that they even seemed to forget they'd done it! They fed the hungry, “watered” the thirsty, incorporated those newly added, covered the shorn, tended the sick (and visited the sheep in prison—there's a cartoon image! The metaphor does break down ...) And, less amusingly, who are described as the accursed, headed for the fire of the eternities never intended for any of humanity?—those who omitted to notice and care for the hungry, thirsty, alien, cold, ill and imprisoned *least of these*. Truly Jesus reveals and identifies with God's heart for the poor and oppressed! And he doesn't mince words in judging those who fail to do likewise. Omission is omission. It doesn't seem to matter, does it, whether they deliberately or “innocently,” cluelessly, failed in this responsibility?

The question is, do we?

How much do we really want to celebrate Christ the King Sunday? Can we really say to all those competing, would-be kings, “You're not the boss of me—Jesus is!”? Because Jesus Christ, who is King of kings and Lord of lords, calls his followers not only to accept, but also to extend, the love and care of God!

This King, Who does not seek his own advantage, sacrificially seeks the good of all God's creation. All of us who follow him are called to that same mindset, that same goal—that same pro-activity on behalf of others. We might rather accept the love and care of God, sit back and maybe even gloat in the abundant provision of our Good shepherd. But this Shepherd/King calls us to more than “just” right relationship with God. He makes very clear that if our right relationship does not extend to those in need around us, then we are NOT in right relationship with God.

So are we *falling away from grace*, reverting to legalism, to ‘earning’ God's favor? No. When God indwells us through Christ Jesus our Lord, truly Christ is formed in us and lived out through us. Not only fellow sheep in this King's flock, we are also named as his agents of provision for the less fortunate around us: his stream, his pasture, his closet, his medicine cabinet.

The Presbyterian Companion to the Book of Common Worship says this about Christ the King Sunday: “As the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Christ is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history, the judge of all people. In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil. Such concepts as these cluster around the affirmation that Christ is King or Christ reigns! As sovereign ruler, Christ calls us to a loyalty that transcends every earthly claim on the human heart. To Christ alone belongs the supreme allegiance in our lives. Christ calls us to stand with those who in every age confessed, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord!’ In every generation, demagogues emerge to claim an allegiance that belongs only to God. But Christ alone has the right to claim our highest loyalty.”

Every Sunday, following the sermon, we affirm our faith together in the words of the Apostles' Creed. You may have noticed Matt Zahniser, across the weeks, putting his right hand on his heart for this, our true Pledge of Allegiance. So on this Christ the King Sunday I invite you to consider whether you'd like to join in this sign of our ultimate allegiance—not angrily, not assertively, but in fear and trembling, asking for strength. We recognize what this allegiance will cost us! As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, we the Church are “those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored but rather as belonging wholly to the world.”

On Christ the King Sunday we acknowledge with confession and repentance that Jesus our King calls us to follow him by serving like him—giving ourselves sacrificially, on behalf of others.