

Message for Christ the King, Year A (11/22/2020)  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Matthew 25:31-46

“Lord, when was it that we saw you...?”

That’s the question that everyone asks at the last judgment, according to Matthew’s depiction. Notice that it’s not just those who’ve neglected the needs of their neighbors who question Jesus’ appearance among “the least of these,” as if to offer an excuse: *Lord, how could we have known it was you?* No, those deemed “righteous” at the last judgment are also surprised to learn that their acts of mercy have been received all along by the King himself: “Lord, when was it that we saw you...?” **Apparently, none of us is especially perceptive when it comes to recognizing God-with-us as we move through the world.**

On the one hand, our unawareness of Christ in our midst is a gift. If I’m no more sensitive to the presence of the Lord than you are, then neither of us is in a position to evaluate the other. The ignorance of both goats and sheep at the final sorting speaks to our fundamental equality in matters of judgment. We’ll all be baffled by what we’ve missed, so none of us can be too self-assured. In other words, if I’m not obviously different from anyone else, then I can’t know now if I or any other person is a sheep or a goat. There’s grace in that because it removes both the burden of self-consciousness, which makes me constantly question if I’m doing it right, and the burden of judgment, which belongs to the King alone.

On the other hand, the King's mysterious presence among us is a challenge. It calls into question our assumptions and our patterns, repeatedly knocking us off the course we set for ourselves and reorienting us to God's purposes for the world. At its heart, it's a theological question. The chief confession on the last Sunday of the liturgical year is that Christ is King. Christ is King, which means Caesar is not. Christ is King, which means partisan ideology is not. Christ is King, which means the economy is not. Christ is King, which means I am not. These affirmations we can understand, even as we continually struggle to order our allegiances properly.

What we can't seem to grasp is the world-altering truth at the center of today's Gospel, the truth that **Christ the King rules the world not from on high, but alongside and among us**. "I was hungry," he recalls at the last judgment, "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." We envision Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords,<sup>1</sup> the one seated at the right hand of God, the "head over all things." How can he "who fills all in all" be manifest in the face of an ordinary person, let alone a person in desperate need?

Theologian Richard Rohr puts his finger on the dilemma:

Humans are more comfortable with a divine monarch at the top of pyramidal reality. So we quickly made the one who described himself as "meek and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29) into an imperial God, both

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 6:15.

in western Rome and eastern Constantinople. This isn't the naked, self-emptying Jesus on the cross. This isn't a vulnerable, relational one, who knows how to be a brother to all creation....

It's no surprise [then] that the Western political notion of the divine right of kings held for so many centuries. We still see that most people are utterly fascinated by those they think are "important" or "powerful," whether athletes, politicians, spiritual leaders, or celebrities. It's as if they have a unique power or energy flowing from "out there" or "up there" ....<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to that myth is the fundamental Christian notion of God's incarnation. God refuses to stand dispassionately above the world, judging between righteous and unrighteous from a distance. Rather, **God so loves the world that God shares our created existence, and even the most seemingly profane aspects of it – hunger and thirst, estrangement, nakedness, illness, isolation. There is no situation so shameful or devastating, no place so desolate or godforsaken, that God will not dwell there.** Dirk Lange of the Lutheran World Federation relates this insight to the theme of discipleship that runs throughout Matthew's Gospel:

[The call to joyful obedience] takes believers to an unexpected place. It takes them to the cross; it takes them to the cross in human lives, to the cross in the life of family, community, society, nation.... It takes them to the place of God's suffering in the world.<sup>3</sup>

Christ identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner precisely because he is the crucified king. And in this way, **he refuses the way of conventional kings – the way of violence and domination – exercising his influence instead through neighborly love.**

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<sup>2</sup> "The Power of Love," [cac.org/the-power-of-love-2016-09-25/](http://cac.org/the-power-of-love-2016-09-25/).

<sup>3</sup> [www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46](http://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46).

Still, neighborly love may seem insignificant in the face of apparently unending need. The sheer volume of suffering in the world leads quickly to compassion fatigue. How can my little life really make a difference? But, the promise of the gospel is that **Christ is present in every moment of solidarity, every instance of vulnerability and courageous listening, every cry for help and every merciful response. The King himself is now and always will be alongside and among us until that day when his reign is established in all its fullness.**

“Lord, when was it that we saw you...?”

Friends, we don’t have to wait until the last judgment to ask that question. *Lord, where do you appear to us in the course of our everyday lives? Lord, where are the marginal places both near and far where you reside? Lord, where are the scars of your suffering, and how can we meet you in it?* Since we don’t as yet walk by sight, we’re bound to miss him.

Nevertheless, let’s walk by faith,<sup>4</sup> trusting that the one who loves us in our deepest need will give us what we need to love one another when the time comes.

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:7.