

Sunday morning worship

November 15, 2020

Christ the King Sunday

Centering words Revelation 5:5-6, 11-12

One of the elders said to me, "Look! The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David has triumphed!" Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and in a loud voice they sang, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Opening prayer

Almighty God, you have conferred upon Christ Jesus sovereignty over every age and nation. Help us, through the grace of Christ, to receive the inheritance of your kingdom, that we might join him in glory and join the celestial worship for eternity. We ask it in his name. Amen.

Scripture readings Matthew 25:31-46.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me." They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" He will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Meditation "Practicing for the Kingdom"

Today is the Sunday that we look forward to the coming Reign of Christ, when the Kingdom of God will be established in its fullness for all time. We all wonder what that Kingdom will look like; and the prophet Isaiah gives us some tantalizing glimpses of it. He tells us that there will be universal peace. People won't have any more use for swords and spears, so they'll melt them down and remake them into hoes and hedge clippers. (Isaiah 2:4) He describes a time when everyone will live together, even those who are natural enemies. When little lambs lie down to sleep, friendly wolves will be their furry pillows. (Isaiah 11:6) He shows us a picture of a table groaning with all kinds of good things – apple dumplings, roast new potatoes, fresh-picked

pears, and chocolate mousse – and everyone can eat as much as they want and never gain an ounce! (Isaiah 25:6) And the best part is that death and the sorrow that accompanies it will be a thing of the past! (Isaiah 25:7) The peace, the feast, and the fellowship with God and with one another will go on forever!

If Isaiah, though, is the one who offers us glimpses of the coming Kingdom, Matthew is the one who tells us what will happen before that Kingdom begins. In his description of what is known as the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46), Matthew envisions all people being divided into two groups: one group that will be welcomed into the Kingdom, while the others will be shown the door. His description reminds me of tourists on a cruise ship who are being divided into groups for shore excursions. As they gather in one of the larger rooms of the ship, they mill around asking one another, “Where are we supposed to be? Are we in the right place?” while cruise personnel direct them. “Group 9? Over in this corner. Group 12? The front row, please. Group 19? You’re on my right. Now, don’t wander away. We’ll be leaving any minute.” After everyone is organized, a tour guide in each group raises a brightly colored paddle that looks like a big lollipop and says, “This way, please. Stay with me!” and they’re off to explore exciting sights on the shore. In Matthew’s vision, however, there are only two groups – he calls them the sheep and the goats – and instead of a cruise director running the show, Jesus is up front holding the microphone.

After everyone is assigned to a group, Jesus turns to the group on the right. “Welcome, friends!” he says. “I’m happy to have you traveling with me! You have done some fantastic things! Why, you’ve helped me again and again. You’ve invited me to dinner, you’ve made sure that I was warm in the winter, you’ve brought me chicken soup when I was under the weather. Why, you were the first one to call me to offer help when I had a spell of bad luck! Good job! The entrance to the Kingdom is the first door on the right. You don’t have to hurry; you have all the time in the world.” But those folks will answer, “What? I never helped you, Jesus! You lived almost 2,000 years ago! How could I have possibly helped you! You must be mistaken!” And then Jesus will answer, “Oh, no; no mistake. Any time you help someone who can’t return the favor, you help me. Now, welcome home!”

And then, Jesus will turn to the group on his left. “I’m sorry,” he’ll say, shaking his head. “I’d love to invite you in, but my Kingdom isn’t for you. You never did anything for me – no food when I was out of a job, no gently used clothing for my kids, no twenty-dollar bill to help me with gas money. In fact, when I asked, you gave me every excuse in the book, but you never gave me any help. I’m sorry. The exit door is right over there.” Then those folks will object, too: “Wait, wait, wait! What are you talking about? I would have given my life for you if I had seen you – which I never did, by the way. And I’ve led a good life! I haven’t broken even one of the Ten Commandments. I’ve read my Bible every single day; I’ve gone to church every single Sunday; and I even tithe! I haven’t done anything wrong!” But Jesus will answer, “No, you haven’t done anything wrong; but you haven’t done anything *right*, either. You haven’t done anything; and that’s the whole point. You wouldn’t fit into my Kingdom, because people here love one another. Who exactly is it that you love? I’m so very sorry. You can let yourselves out.”

Now, I’m not convinced that Jesus will be as hard on us as Matthew says he will be. Matthew, after all, comes from a time when the Christian church was being persecuted; and I’m sure that he was more than a little resentful of those people who called themselves Christians but didn’t act like Christians should. I’m also pretty sure that life isn’t nearly as black and white as Matthew would have us believe. But he makes a good point, and one that we would do well to take to heart. What we do speaks louder than any words we might say. We can profess loudly that we

are Christians, but if our actions don't reflect what we profess to believe, then our Christianity looks a little thin. The Kingdom isn't for those people who just *talk* about Jesus; the Kingdom is for those folks who treat other people like Jesus. The Kingdom, in other words, is for those who practice what they preach.

And practicing being a Christian is what makes us fit for the Kingdom. Imagine, if you will, a football team getting together for their first practice of the season. All the young men bounce up to the coach, each one hoping to make it into the starting lineup. "OK," the coach says, "it's good to see all of you again! Now, before we get started, I want to know what all of you did to stay in condition during the off-season." "I did weight training," one says. "I lifted weights every single day." "I worked on running," another says. "I ran at least a little bit every day." "I worked on my catches," says a third. "I can catch that football now if I'm upside down!" I imagine that the coach is happy with all those answers. But what if those young men would have said, "Oh, we didn't do anything. We stayed home and didn't risk an injury. We read all about football, though, and organized a discussion group about the game. We're all ready to play!" Coach wouldn't be so happy about that, would he? He might say, "What do you mean? You can't get ready for a football game by talking about it! You have to practice for it!!" In the same way, God is delighted when we practice for the Kingdom by showing love, compassion, and acceptance through our actions. We can talk about it all we want, but we need to do something to practice our Christian skills. Otherwise... well, we just won't be ready!

There is an old story that illustrates the difference between being in the Kingdom and being on the outside of it. The story goes that God offered to show one of the saints the difference between heaven and hell. God took the saint to hell first. There was no fire and brimstone, and no little black imps tormenting the residents with pitchforks. In fact, the residents of hell were seated at a huge banquet table with all kinds of delicacies in front of them. They were lamenting bitterly, though, because none of them had elbows and they couldn't get the food to their hungry mouths. God then took the saint to heaven. The scene was the same. The residents were seated at a banquet table there, too, with the same delicious food in front of them. None of the heavenly residents had elbows, either. But the scene was entirely different. The people in heaven were rejoicing, because they fed one another.

Have we practiced for the coming of the Kingdom? Have we considered the hunger of others when we go shopping at Kroger? Have we been as concerned about the clothing on the back of a poverty-stricken child as much as the clothing in our own walk-in closets? Have we worried about the availability of health care for others, or only about the cost of our own? Have we tried to connect with people who are different than we are, or do we just ignore them? Maybe we need to look around and realize that Jesus is in every one of them. OK, saints, so practice starts right now! After all, we want to be ready for the big game! And God wants us to be ready, too.

Pastoral prayer

Eternal God, ruler of all nations, we come with deep thanksgiving for your gracious care. You have not forsaken your people, but in Christ you have chosen to live in our midst. We are grateful that you, the One who created the cosmos, became our servant and stooped to care for the needs of the lowly and humble. Through Christ, we have reassurance that you hear us when we pray, grieve with us when we are burdened, and care enough to follow and redeem us when we stray from your way.

We pray today for our earthly rulers, especially those who govern our country. Help them to serve in the image of your own care and compassion. Keep them from setting themselves apart from the needs of those whom they serve, and grant them the wisdom and the patience to work for the well-being of all. Help them to resist the temptations that accompany earthly power, and help us to support them as they strive to govern wisely and well.

We pray, too, for the leaders of foreign nations, both those who are our political allies and those we consider to be our enemies. Help us to work with our allies towards common strength, mutual benefits, and an even greater commitment towards justice and peace. And towards those with whom we cannot agree, grant us compassion and the humility to try to understand their point of view. Through Christ, keep us from rebuilding the walls of hostility and misunderstanding that he came to abolish. Through your Spirit, grant us the wisdom and the courage to work peacefully with all peoples.

As we live in a world that is so often filled with hate, may we continue to glimpse that time when your vision will be realized and the lion will lie down with the lamb; that time when war will be only a distant memory.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, the one who is not only our ruler, but also our teacher, our guide, and our friend; and we join now using the prayer that he taught us, saying, *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever!” Amen.*

Offering ***Reminder: send your offerings to church!***

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!
Praise God, all creatures here below.
Praise God above, ye heavenly host.
Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost! Amen.

Benediction

Now go forth to love and serve the Lord.
As you go, remember that you serve God by serving the weakest among you.
May you see Jesus in everyone you meet.
And know that the love of God,
the grace of Christ,
and the guidance of the Holy Spirit goes with you,
until Christ comes again with the fullness of the Kingdom. Amen.