Last Sunday after Pentecost
Feast of Christ the King
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Matthew 25:31-46

This really is a very packed Sunday. There's the Feast of Christ the King. But we also have one of the most powerful parables in all the bible for our Gospel reading. And it's the last Sunday of the Church year, and coming right up, we have Thanksgiving. So, let's see if we can unpack all this a bit.

Starting with Christ the King, just a little bit of history may be helpful. This is actually not an ancient festival. It relates to events that our parents and grandparents lived through. In 1925, Pope Pius XI instituted this day in the aftermath of the First World War to try push back the increasing rise of secular, human-centered ideologies, that been supercharged by war, revolution and dislocation. That wasn't just communism in Russia, but also fascism in Italy under Mussolini. Both communism and fascism downplayed the role of God and encouraged people to put their faith and trust in humans, and particularly in strongmen. The Pope's general point was relatively simple: when we rely solely upon our own judgement and our human perception of right and wrong, rather than acknowledging some higher power and greater authority, we are much, much more likely to go wrong.

But as the 1930s followed the 1920s, we really stress tested this less than 10 years later with the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. Hitler tried to bend the German Protestant churches to his will by forming a single essentially Nazi Protestant Church. This "church" would adopt Aryan or white supremacy theology, while also trying to basically strip the Jewish influences and elements out of the bible. The effect, as one writer put it, was to shift attention from the "humanity of God, to the divinity of man". Now some brave souls pushed back, and issued something called the Barmen Declaration which reasserted the Kingship of Christ, emphasizing that Christ, and Christ alone, "as testified in Scripture, is the Word of God. He is God's revelation and the church's authority." Only Christ is King: no human, no country, no earthly power. If Christ is King all good things follow, but without that nothing does. OK, history lesson over — although I am a history graduate, so you get what you pay for!

Anyway, let's turn next to the parable of the sheep and the goats. In full disclosure, I should probably tell you that I find this the most frightening passage in the whole bible, New Testament or Old. To slightly adapt Jefferson's famous phrase about slavery, "this … question, like a fire bell in the night, awaken[s] and fill[s] me with terror." Why? Because this is judgment day, and I'm fairly sure that I fail the test. As you've just heard, the sheep who pass the test go to the right, the goats who fail it go to the left. But step back a second. If I fed the hungry once, or gave a drink to the thirsty once, or welcomed the stranger once, or clothed the naked once, or tended the sick once, or visited the prisoner just once, am I ok, am I saved? And if I failed to do any of those things just once, am I eternally condemned? I think the only way to make sense of this parable is to understand that this is not so much about actions, and how many times you do them – remember that in fact that both the sheep and the goats have to ask when they might have done this good thing or this bad thing. No, it's more that this is asking us what's at our core, what's our internal compass, what drives us? And that's why I worry I fail the test. Last week in

Washington DC, relatively early one morning over the course of just a mile of walking, I avoided pleas for help from the homeless, failed to stop to talk to the friendless stranger, failed to check on someone who was clearly sick. That feels more goat than sheep to me. So, what this parable is – terrifyingly – asking is what is my orientation, what is my internal compass here? And it's asking you what is yours? What is your orientation? Towards Christ, or towards yourself; towards generosity, or towards selfishness; towards life, or towards death? And this links back to Christ the King, as we begin to realize that it is not just acknowledging that he is king, but also understanding exactly what type of king he is.

The parable tells us: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory." "Glory", "throne", "glory" again – yes, but not in the earthly sense. This is a different kind of King – who doesn't wield earthly power, who isn't violent, who doesn't seek to own and control everything. This King is a judge to be sure, but what he judges, what he cares about, is what people give away, not what they gain; how they care for others, not themselves; whether they are at their core generous, or whether they are selfish. This is the absolute opposite of so many human leaders – kings and emperors, presidents and prime minsters. They seek to project strength, often through violence; seek to control; seek to suppress caring and even empathy. But this Sunday we are reminded that Christ is King, not them.

Next up on this busy Sunday: Thanksgiving. Here we acknowledge what the God of heaven and earth has given us. The blessings he has bestowed on us – not because of our own goodness, or our own efforts, but through his grace and generosity. A grace and generosity that – if we are sheep – we will reflect back into the world; but which, if we're goats, we won't. But here's the good news. Our orientation towards grace and generosity can take many forms. It can be going out into the highways and byway and doing all the things mentioned in the parable. But it can also be writing generous checks that enable others to do that. It can be the forgiveness of hurt and insults caused by others to restore a relationship not damaged by you. It can be talking to your neighbors, treating them as friends and as human beings, when politics has driven you apart. As Christ our King makes clear to us again and again and again, forgiveness from the Father is always available. All we have to do is turn around and repent. Reorient ourselves towards God. Sheep rather than goats. Giving thanks. And when better to start than today?

And finally, this Sunday is the end of the old church year and the beginning, next Sunday, of the new one. So, before we begin Advent, the period of waiting for the coming of a defenseless baby – the baby that is Christ the King – going forward let's make a New Year's resolution. A resolution to tear ourselves away from these earthly games of thrones, from our self-righteous anger, from this red team vs the blue team thinking, to remember instead whose children and whose subjects we all – all – are. We are human – you and I – and it will be so until the end of time. We will always retain the capacity to do good, but also to do evil; to be peaceable, but also to be violent; to be gentle, but also to be cruel. Yet if we can acknowledge Christ as our everlasting King, the model we should follow rather than any earthly ruler. And if we will acknowledge his peaceable kingdom as the template for the type of country in which we should seek to live, rather than one that valorizes earthly power and glory. Well, then we will be a little closer to the hope and purpose of him who died, that baby become man, broken upon a cross of wood to save us from our sins – a little closer to our Lord and Saviour who is Christ the King.

Amen.