

It has been twenty-three weeks since we celebrated the Feast of Pentecost: almost six months now of what is sometimes called “ordinary time.” Historically this *last* Sunday after Pentecost—*this last Sunday of the liturgical year*—has been called “Christ the King Sunday.” It is now sometimes called, “The Reign of Christ”—not only to be more inclusive, but more theologically accurate as well. Because whenever we talk about Jesus as “king” it can get confusing. What kind of king is Jesus, anyway? A king who wears a crown of thorns, and is spit upon and mocked in a purple robe is not any kind of king with which we tend to be very familiar. Kings lord it over us; Jesus comes among us to serve.

We proclaim as central to the mystery of faith that *Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again*. If you look at the rhythm of the liturgical calendar, then you have to go back even further than 23 weeks ago, to Friday, April 22—Good Friday. We remembered on that day that Christ really died on a cross outside of Jerusalem. That event, foolish and scandalous to many, takes us to the heart of the wisdom of God and to the core of our faith. And then on the third day we lit the holy fire and we sang our alleluias again as we celebrated the Paschal mystery: *Christ is risen*. Not once-upon-a-time in a land far away, where Jesus *was* raised and showed his hands and side to a few frightened disciples. We sang on Easter morning that Christ *is* alive—“no longer bound to distant years in Palestine...He comes to claim the here and now...” Christ is present in the Eucharist and present in the world, disguised especially as poor, and thirsty, and naked, and in prison.

Christ has died. Christ is risen... and Christ will come again.

Starting on Easter Day and continuing through the fiftieth day—the Feast of Pentecost—and now for twenty-three weeks in a row, we have been reflecting in one way or another on this Reign of Christ. Lately we’ve been hearing a fair amount from the teachings of Jesus, about the Kingdom of God, which Jesus says is present, here, among us: even if in only tiny mustard-seed like ways. It is present, like salt or yeast or a candle that flickers in the darkness. It is already, and not yet. It is real, and this Kingdom has the potential to do great things if tended to and cared for. Today we reach the culmination of those reflections about the future to peak at the end of the story, to glimpse what will be at the end of human history.

If you can read a newspaper, or if you watch the news on television, or if you have feeds on your homepage from CNN or *The New York Times* then you don’t need me to tell you that it feels like we are a long way from the Reign of Christ. And maybe even that it feels like we’re heading in the wrong direction. Tea partiers and Occupy Wall Streeters agree on nothing, it seems, except for one thing: the system is utterly broken. And the poor pay the heaviest price for that...

The number of people in poverty in this country in 2010 was 46.2 million, the largest number in the 52 years for which poverty estimates have been published. Fifteen million of those are children. Last week I mentioned in preaching about talents that the average household income within a one mile radius of this church is \$100,000. The poverty level in this country is defined

as a family of four with an income of less than \$22,500 a year. And there are a whole lot more, the [near poor](#), who are barely making ends meet and in danger of slipping deeper into poverty.

Every time we seem to make some progress in the Middle East, it seems that there is a setback. We still live in a dangerous world, and even when we choose not to live in fear or set foreign policies rooted in anxiety, we must never confuse Christian hope with wishful thinking. We cannot wish dictators away, cruel men who oppress and hurt and destroy their own people, God's own people.

It is a violent world we live in, and the evils perpetrated against our children can give us nightmares. In churches, in schools and on college campuses from Penn State to the Citadel—no place is immune from predators who would hurt the young and vulnerable. We pray at Holy Baptism that every child of God will know the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works. Yet a few broken and sick adults can do so much serious damage to that joy and wonder.

So you don't need me to tell you about the violence and degradation of the world we live in. Why then do we come to this place? To forget? To escape?

No...we come here to remember. We come here to listen to God's Word, and to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it until by God's grace we are empowered and equipped and encouraged to act as instruments of God's peace: to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God. We come here to be awakened to the reality of what it means to be the Church in the face of so much pain. We come here to be awakened to the dream of God for a better world.

So here we are: twenty-three weeks after the Feast of Pentecost, gathered here to consider the Reign of Christ, that day when the mustard seed of God's reign comes to full fruition and there are new heavens and a new earth and God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. We pause to imagine a day of justice and peace, a time when every tear is wiped away, a time when those who have caused pain and violence are held accountable for their actions. This day, like every day for us who bear the name of Christ, is about Jesus who suffered and died on a cross; the risen Christ who brings healing in his wings and new possibilities; the king of kings who will separate the sheep from the goats.

Notice, however, that in today's gospel reading the criteria for judgment is not about who claims Jesus as lord. That proclamation is ours—as his disciples and we should own that and share that good news with all the world. That confession takes us to the very core of our faith: Jesus is Lord. Those words define us as Christians and hold us together.

But in this particular text, on this particular day, the words from Matthew's gospel are addressed to the *nations*, not just to Jesus' disciples. And the criteria by which *the nations* are judged as either "sheep" or "goat" is not about a theological claim, but about ethics. And quite specifically: about how the poor and vulnerable are treated in any given society.

So it isn't about whether a nation is, or claims to be, a *Christian* nation. (Many will say, "Lord, Lord.") In fact, Jesus' parable seems to presume a good bit of confusion among the sheep and goats about which they are. Some say, "Lord, Lord...we love you Jesus" but they are in truth goats masquerading as sheep—because they ignored the poor. And some may say, "Praise be to Allah" or "*Namaste*"—but if they do justice and love mercy and care for the hungry and the sick and those in prison, they discover in the end that they were really sheep. Even if they didn't do these things in the name of Jesus, they still did them to Christ himself. That *is* what the text says, after all. It is what Jesus says—or at least what Matthew records Jesus as having said.

In any event, our work is not to be the King—the Judge; that job is taken. We don't get to decide who is a sheep or who is a goat: the Son of Man does. But as people who do claim him Jesus as Lord, we have an even greater obligation to listen to his words and to act according to his command. We have an obligation to behave like sheep in the meantime. For that is where we live...in the meantime. We are called to respect the dignity of every human being. We are called to work for justice. We are called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit those in prison.

That can feel pretty paralyzing because when we awaken to the pain and suffering of this world—whether it be in Africa, or in Central America, or in Worcester County. There are too many who are hungry and sick and naked and in prison. It can feel like we could work to the point of burnout and it would still not be nearly enough.

But the truth is, we do not do this work alone. It is among the many, many reasons, why we need each other: why we need community. Not just in this parish church but as part of a community that is connected to a Diocese, and to a national Church, and to a global Communion. And it is why even the Church—the Anglican Communion—cannot do this work alone. We need ecumenical and interfaith partnerships with all who are willing to do justice and love mercy, whatever their faith tradition may be. This text reminds us that it is the work that matters, and that work (along with our confession of Jesus as Lord) defines who we are, and invites us to get clearer about being sheep who know the Good Shepherd rather than goats who simply mouth the words.

Today's gospel reading can leave us feeling paralyzed and guilty. But by God's grace, it can awaken us to our true vocation as followers of Jesus:

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'