

Royalty Re-Imagined

Matthew 25:31-46

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Christ the King

Prayer: Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth, find freedom, and in your will discover peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I remember visiting a church one time where the preacher for the day was a missionary, home from wherever he was serving and making the rounds of supporting congregations. I don't remember where he was from. He gave the sermon that day and I don't remember that either. But I do remember the children's message, which was delivered by the wife of the missionary.

She invited all the boys and girls to the front of the church and once they were seated, she proceeded to tell them about the sheep and the goats. About a world where you are either a sheep or a goat and that you wanted to make sure you were a sheep because if you were a goat—if you were bad or naughty and were a goat, she said to those small children who were now looking at her with confused looks on their faces like, “What is she talking about...”she warned them about what was going to happen to the goats one day. That they would be thrown into the eternal fire along with the devil and all his angels.

Then the children had a quick prayer and went off to have a snack.

Part of me cringes when I read texts like this one, about sheep and goats—about judgment, really. But it is in scripture and we cannot ignore it. And there is a lot about our world that needs judging.

I don't know what you think about the Occupy Wall Street Movement. I'm sure if we were to survey you and get your opinions, they would cover the spectrum. I'm sure there are some who don't like it at all—that all these attempts to disrupt things are misguided and that their understanding of economics and business is naïve.

And I'm sure there are others here who while not about to go join their ranks, are nonetheless sympathetic to the movement and to those gathered in over 900 cities now, around the world to protest greed and corruption. That tends to be where I am on it.

Because it's not very hard these day to make the case that something is horribly broken and unfair about the way in which the world is ordered. Numbers don't lie and the statistics are sobering when it comes to the widening gap between the rich and poor. And whatever your politics may be, there is no economist out there who believes that trend is sustainable.

And the issue seems to be one of entitlement and privilege, and it's been brewing for a long time now. Who has a right to healthcare and a good education? Who has a right to vote and to live in certain neighborhoods? It seems as if we are always engaged in the great struggle against abuses of power and privilege—of needing to look out for the vulnerable who, without resources, voice or access to power, are always at risk.

How should the privileged behave?

Today is known as Christ the King Sunday. It marks the conclusion of the liturgical year that takes us through the life of Jesus. Next Sunday we will start a new liturgical year beginning with Advent which prepares us for Christmas and the arrival of Jesus into our world. And as such, this Sunday reminds us that the one whose birth we anticipate celebrating is one who despite his humble origins comes to us nonetheless as royalty but, in a very unconventional sense.

The ways in which this royal birth will intersect from day one with the harsh realities of the world will be obvious in the coming weeks as we remember his stabled birth. We will recall how a frightened young couple took their newborn baby and fled for their lives. This king we now know as Jesus is the same one who as an adult had no place to lay his head, profoundly contradicting what the world thinks of when it comes to royalty.

As Americans we have a strange fascination with royalty. Part of us loves the fairytale but strip that away, and the notion of class and privilege, of arrogant entitlement, goes against our very nature.

But it was into just such a world that Jesus came. It was a world where even his followers continued to argue about which one of them was the most important, a world where the best seats at the banquet tables were always reserved for the elite. A world where too much of the religion further burdened already burdened people with more guilt and shame and high bars they could never meet. A world where it was not hard at all to see the huge disparity between those who had a lot and those who had nothing. A world, frankly, not so different from our own, as it turns out.

So on this Christ the King Sunday, at the end of the liturgical season in which we've celebrated his birth, been invited to follow him and learn from him, a season where we've mourned his violent and unfair death and yet celebrated his resurrection and have come to experience him in the breaking of the bread and the passing of the cup, we come to the end of the liturgical year and acknowledge Jesus as our king, alright, but he's a different kind of king than the world recognizes.

We celebrate in the life of Jesus, that the God who was on high came low, living into the human condition that led him to a cross where in mystery, he smothered human sin and fallenness and swallowed up death, opening the way to life eternal. And we celebrate a king who rejected a crown of gold and wore instead a crown of thorns—a king under whose reign all are made to feel like royalty.

There is an old spiritual that was sung by slaves, "I got a robe, you got a robe, all God's children got a robe." Slave owners used to listen as their slaves sang that song, assuming that it was just a playful, frivolous little song, missing completely the profound theological truth in those words. Those illiterate slaves saw right through the hypocrisy of their white slave owners as they sang confidently about a day when justice would rule—about a day they knew was coming when the wrongs of this world would be forever made right. Those slaves sang about it because they had a king and they knew who their true master was!

And in this text, Jesus tells us how we are to behave in order to be considered righteous and there too, it isn't what most people expected. It wasn't about putting on a show or engaging in public acts of piety. In fact those who Jesus calls righteous don't seem to know what they've done to be called that.

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, when did we see you thirsty and give you something to drink, or when did we see you naked and clothe you?” And, “I think we’d remember Lord, if you’d been in prison and we went to visit you? When was it that these things happened?”

And Jesus responds to those he calls righteous, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

It’s not really very complicated, in fact I saw the message stated on a T-shirt one time which simply said, “Ignore the poor? Go to hell. Matthew 25.” The righteous ones, according to Jesus, are the ones who quietly go about tending to the world’s vulnerable, serving the hungry, the poor, the naked, the lonely and those imprisoned. The righteous are those who spend their time *not* protecting and fortifying what they already have, but selflessly caring for the needs of others.

In an essay by E.M. Forster entitled “What I Believe,” he writes,

I believe in aristocracy. Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos. They are sensitive for others as well as for themselves, they are considerate without being fussy, their pluck is not swankiness but the power to endure, and they can take a joke.

Jesus sent into the world to minister in his name people who were not members of the powerful elite or the one percent, or the moral majority for that matter. He sent ordinary, everyday people and he sent them into ordinary, everyday kinds of places and situations. Into places like hospitals and classrooms, prisons and city streets, into nice neighborhoods and not so nice neighborhoods, to find those in need and bind them up. And there is a sense in which that quiet, faithful dignity that many failed to recognize in Jesus still gets largely overlooked today.

I am sometimes dismayed at the way in which we’re so easily dazzled by celebrity and are susceptible to the superficial, to the point where we’ve forgotten what quiet dignity looks like.

Dignity shows when ordinary people quietly go about their lives, using their gifts and tending to the business to which they have been called—no fanfare or attention being called to themselves. They just do it without thinking twice. You know the kind of thing I’m talking about here. And when praise does come their way or they are singled out and called heroes, they are the first to blush and to shun any such status or praise being heaped upon them, saying that they were only doing what everyone else would have done, which while modest is sadly not the case.

“Just as you do it to the least of these, who are my family, you do it to me,” Jesus says to describe what it looks like, and who wouldn’t want to serve a king who sees the world in those terms?

For us to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and to identify him as our king, is to understand that the kingdom he established was not some far-off-pie-in-the-sky type of place existing in the Land of Tomorrow. Jesus said that the reign of God is here and it is now, found not in the extraordinary, but in the common, ordinary, everyday experiences and places in life. And the kingdom he established is one without any money or power as the world understands power. It is not made up of the like-minded and those of similar status, but is instead made up of

sinners and saints from all walks of life and from every human family and neighborhood, whether it's a squatters encampment of displaced farmers in Colombia or right here on Summit Avenue in St. Paul.

It includes the lost and the lonely, the weak and the strong, and it includes those who have been forgiven and those who badly need to be forgiven. King Jesus re-imagined the concept of royalty and redefined it forever in the way he dined with gluttons and sinners, welcomed children, hung out with drunkards and prostitutes and cavorted with tax collectors.

He tossed the notions of royalty and status out the window when he defiled himself by touching sick people with his bare hands. And in telling stories and parables that glorified a despised race of people like the Samaritans, he uplifted and glorified all those in society who find themselves despised and rejected simply because of who they are.

This is Jesus. He is our King and worthy of our worship and praise, and nothing less than our lives.

Amen.