

What Kind of King?

Do you know how many countries in today's world are ruled by a king or a queen? I didn't know. So I googled. And learned that forty-three nations are monarchies.

Our own country has a president, not a king. But we're familiar with the monarchy of the United Kingdom, where Queen Elizabeth II has reigned with dedication, dignity, and benevolence for more than sixty-five years.

In news reports, we've heard about other heads of state. The rulers we tend to hear most about aren't so benevolent. In some parts of the world, tyrants govern with an iron fist, although they don't necessarily bear the actual title of king. Dictators and despots have used their power to impoverish, imprison, and even kill their own people; all the while lining their own pockets and living in splendor.

And so, the Bible laments, did some of the kings of ancient Israel. Kings whose regimes were noted for injustice, exploitation, and oppression. Which do not escape the notice of the Holy One. Six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, God

speaks by the prophet Ezekiel, likening these kings, who mistreat God's people, to shepherds who abuse and slaughter sheep instead of caring for them. These corrupt shepherds are history. They're finished. God's had enough. God's taking over as shepherd.

And that's good news! The Old Testament's portrayal of the Lord as our shepherd is very full of comfort. In today's reading from Ezekiel, we hear God's promise to seek out sheep. To rescue sheep. To gather them in. To bring them home. To provide clear water and good pasture. And God's servant David is instrumental in accomplishing God's will for the sheep.

Now you know about David. You know how he went from tending his father's sheep to ruling as Israel's great king. Centuries after David, Ezekiel foretells the coming of another shepherd from the house of David. Since its earliest days, the church has believed that Ezekiel's prophecy points directly to Jesus the Messiah. To the Christ. To another, greater King.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Today the church ponders what that means. Today we reflect on just what it is we're saying when we make the claim that Christ is King. What kind of king

is Jesus the Christ? And how does his kingship shape the way we live?

It seems to me that a good place to begin searching for answers to these questions is in Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture, as the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus himself offers one of our most cherished images of him when he says, “I am the good shepherd.” In him, God is perfectly revealed. Jesus does the work of the One who sent him. We picture him watching over his sheep, looking for them, finding them. Picture him lifting up the straying ones and tenderly laying them on his shoulder and carrying them back where they belong. Picture him bringing them into the fold. Picture him making sure his lambs are safe and well-fed. Picture him separating sheep from goats, because wooly-coated sheep can better tolerate cold.

Of course, we know that when Jesus talks about his sheep, he’s really talking about people. The people of God. The ones who belong to the Shepherd.

This good Shepherd—according to Matthew’s Gospel—comes from the lineage of David. A royal lineage. A lineage of kings. So one thing we can say with certainty about Jesus is that he is the Shepherd King.

But that's not the only way we think of him on this Christ the King Sunday. Today is the final Sunday of the Christian calendar. It's the culmination, the summing up of the dominion and power and authority of Christ. It's a time to contemplate the many portraits of him we've glimpsed during this church year. Like the end of the secular year, it's a time to look back. And it's also a time to look to the future.

In today's Gospel reading, we catch a vision of the future. Fittingly, on this last Sunday of the Christian year, we hear Jesus' last long teaching to his followers, up on the Mount of Olives. Just days before his arrest.

In the vision he shows us, the one we call *the Last Judgment*, we see the King, now returned in glory. Just as the shepherd knows sheep from goats, just as the shepherd knows his sheep, the King knows his people. And this King knows who are *not* his people. He distinguishes one from the other—judges between them—on the basis of small, ordinary deeds of kindness. Giving a cup of cold water. Preparing a meal. Stopping by for a visit. Communicating that we care. Jesus names these acts of service as precisely what determines your and my eternal destiny.

Whoa. Did your wheels just start turning? *Hold on, preacher. Wait just a minute*, you say. The Bible and the church both teach that salvation is *by grace through faith*. But here's Jesus himself judging people on the criterion of good works. Doesn't that sound like works-salvation?

What about faith?

We know that faith is God's gift of grace. And that's what saves us. But if faith is authentic, it's "manifested in the service of love." Love of God and love of neighbor. A lively, genuine faith can't *not result in faithful activity*, in ministering—even and especially to the least of these who are our neighbors. As James reminds us: *Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. James asks: What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs?*

I think Jesus wants to be sure we understand that if faith is real—if we're walking with him and striving to grow into his likeness—then we'll do what he does and serve as he serves and follow where he leads, into the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world. Conversely, if there *is* no faith and Jesus is rejected, a person will see human need and pass by on

the other side. And miss out on entering Christ's eternal kingdom.

We have a choice. And for whatever choice we make, Jesus will require from us an accounting. It *is* through faith that we're saved. But it's on our works that we are judged. Today we're offered another portrait of Jesus: the King of Judgment.

Seeing Christ as the King who judges fills you and me with awe. And might even fill us with dread. But please remember, my brothers and sisters, that this is the very same Jesus who loves with an unfathomable love. This is the very same Jesus who loves each one of us with a limitless love, particularly—especially—the overlooked, the oppressed, and the outcast.

It's because he loves that he judges. Jesus holds you and me accountable for being his hands, for doing his work, for caring for the forgotten. The lowly. The least. This is the very same Jesus who loves with a passion. This Jesus is all *com*-passion. Today we envision Christ the King of Compassion.

Compassion means *suffer with*. Jesus sees suffering, and he calls *us* to open our eyes and see it, too. And having seen it, to act. Not to pass judgment—that's *his* job—but to respond. To make a difference.

Jim Wallis observes that “...one in six children in America is poor; thirty-six million live below the poverty line; four million families are hungry; fourteen million have housing needs...we connect with the poor in two primary ways: television and statistics. These sometimes give us a concern, which is a recognition that there is a problem. Compassion, in contrast, is a feeling of relationship.”

This feeling of relationship comes when we know the names of those for whom poverty is a companion. This feeling of relationship comes when we're able to put a face on hunger. This feeling of relationship comes when, as God commands, we welcome the stranger—even the strangers on our shores. When we gather them in, even as we ourselves have been gathered in by the One who first loved us.

To this One, it matters not how many articles of religion we can recite or how many doctrines we know or how many theological degrees we have. What matters to the King of Compassion is that we love deeply. And that we make our love visible, that we make our love tangible—through small but life-changing acts of caring for those whose need is great.

Each of these persons—every human creature—is created in the image of God. In every person we encounter, Jesus invites you and me to see God’s image. And so to see Jesus himself, for he is the exact imprint of God’s very being. In the least of these who are members of Christ’s family, we behold *his* face. So closely does Jesus identify with the needy and the hurting of this world that whatever we do—or don’t do—for them, we do—or don’t do—for him. Caring for them is caring for Christ. For he is one of them. He knows who they are. And he knows *where* they are, because he has been there.

He knows what it is to experience humble circumstances, for he was born in a stable. That’s what kind of king he is.

He knows what it is to be poor, for he had few material possessions. That’s what kind of king he is.

He knows what it is to be hungry, for he depended on others for food. That’s what kind of king he is.

He knows what it is to be thirsty, for he walked hot, dusty roads. That’s what kind of king he is.

He knows what it is to be homeless, for he never had a place to lay his head. That’s what kind of king he is.

He knows what it is to suffer, for he hung on a cruel cross.
That's what kind of king he is.

Jesus Christ is the King of your heart, a heart filled with thanksgiving, for he has died for you and he has forgiven you and he watches over you and he lives to make intercession for you.

Jesus Christ is the King who knows you intimately, who claims you and calls you by name.

Jesus Christ is the King you serve with joy and gladness, with all that you are and all that you have.

Jesus Christ is the exalted King who fills all in all. Who is above every name that is named. Who is head over all things. Beneath his feet, all idols crumble. Before him, rulers silent fall.

Jesus Christ is King of Kings! And he reigns in glory and honor and majesty, in this age and in the age to come. For all time and forevermore!

Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.