

Christ the King Matthew 25:31-46
(22Nov2020)

Hymn: "Holy God, Holy and Glorious" (ELW 637)

That beautiful hymn is one of my favorites, for the particular way it portrays reversals and paradox. That matches today's festival and reading where Christ is a very different kind of king.

Now, this passage from Jesus seems most frequently interpreted as an instruction list, a little roadmap or guide to the anti-stars: On your left, you'll see the hungry; feed them. Ahead, are immigrants to be welcomed. To your right, please notice ill people who need care.

Certainly I'm not going to argue against that. If such guideposts and reminders serve you well (and, therefore, serve others), go for it! It would do well to pay mind to those in prison and offer shelter and clothing to those who are cold.

We probably even consider it the "Christian" thing to do.

With that consideration, what if we take seriously a last judgment, when helping the "least of these" and doing enough good would make Jesus say, "come, inherit the kingdom my Father has prepared for you"?

I've highlighted before a difference between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, meaning right beliefs vs. right actions. With this judgment of helpfulness, you'd have your marching orders, and your time could be better spent getting down to work, giving water to the thirsty and welcoming strangers and so on. With that, I can't help but notice Jesus himself doesn't really matter. He's absent for now, and only would show up to usher you into your inheritance. Plus, this worship service would be of little service.

But before you click off your screen and hop off the couch and head out to do good for the least of these, let's complicate it with some details:

In the Gospel of Matthew, this language refers to Christians. This is mostly for how others treat Christians. A clue to that is the phrase "members of my family." We may expand to a notion of the whole human family, and solidarity especially with the poor. But in Matthew, this familial language is

about those who are followers of Jesus, about the church.

In an earlier passage, someone told Jesus, "your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." But Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (12:47, 50). That's his family.

More to the point, this passage has the "least" or the littlest ones. Well, Jesus several times talks about the little ones. It tends to mean the no-name disciples, that this isn't only about Peter and James and John, heavy duty wonder-working super preachers. Jesus values the followers who barely understand and need a lot of help and may hardly be able to find the way on their own.

Jesus says little ones are like a lost lamb the shepherd would leave the flock of 100 to go find. Little ones are so important to Jesus that it would be better to wear concrete galoshes and be drowned rather than cause a little one to stumble. If you give even a cup of cold water to a little one, you'll never lose your reward.

You yourself might feel like one of the little ones—slow, lost, of little faith. Not only is that okay, Jesus cherishes you dearly. He'll search for you. He tries to protect you and support you. It's not about performing amazing good works as a front row superstar Christian. Jesus is especially interested in little ones with your vulnerable and tenuous faith.

The little and "least" also contrast with the "greatest." Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples asked who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says it's not about being great, for those who want to think highly of themselves or gain special privileges. Instead he points to being like a little child as greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18:1-4).

So maybe in caring for the least and littlest, you focus on the children of our congregation and what you can do for them. Young people, this from Jesus is part of why we're thinking about new visions for our ministry for you and your families, knowing

your importance and putting you at the center. You are where we find Jesus.

That's the heart of it: we're here because this is entirely focused on Jesus. An absent Jesus, sure. But where he tells us he may be found.

Again, you may take this list and seize responsibilities of feeding, visiting, caring, giving. You may figure where your attentions should lie. But this isn't You the Good-Deed-Doer Sunday. It's Christ the King Sunday.

The main thing for us to notice isn't what we're supposed to be doing. It's this incredibly good news of where Jesus has promised to be, or with whom he wants to be identified: with the least.

For a contrast, we mostly try to be identified more glamorously and winningly. We put on an Aaron Rodgers jersey or a Captain America t-shirt or have an outfit that looks like a princess or are convinced to purchase the make-up a movie star wears. Jesus, however, decides to put on a hospital gown that doesn't quite close in the back, and chooses the embarrassing orange pajamas of a prisoner, and the shabby, stained, stinky, fraying clothes of a homeless person. Mother Teresa referred to it as "Christ in his distressing disguise."

Silly King Jesus doesn't care to be known with the greatest and most eloquent and hardest working. He'd rather be identified in his disciples who aren't doing great at his mission, and who maybe can't feed themselves, or are the strangest of strangers.

This remarkable Sunday caps a church year. Further, this is the last episode of Jesus' ministry. We could almost call it his last words, because right after this the story moves to his death. And this capper isn't a vision of conquering, overcoming, overpowering, not about saying "just wait until Easter" or "just you wait until the endtimes." This isn't really a triumphal Jesus who comes later with a throne and a crown, large and in charge.

It is for today, right now. Jesus wants to be known with the least, the lowest, the lost, the left out. With the weak. With the hurting, the needy. With children. The Gospel of Matthew distinguishes Jesus as Emmanuel, as God with us.

Today Jesus reassures that he is king not because he's powerful, not as the bossy best, not because he gets his way.

From his very first public words in the Gospel, in the Beatitudes, Jesus contrasted this kingdom with the empires of his day and ours: "blessed are the poor in spirit," he began, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In these last words, he says, "blessed are the poor in everything, the least, because I'm with them and in them, even if you don't recognize me."

Lest we miss the point, it's not just those who are suffering or wishing for better life where Jesus says he may be found. It's in the complete loss of life. That's the next step in this Gospel, as he goes into death, even there so that he may be Emmanuel, God-with-us, and bring us all, in all of our need, with him into life.