

**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24**

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup>I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. <sup>14</sup>I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup>I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice....Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup>Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup>I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

**Matthew 25:31-46**

“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. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>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,<sup>[a]</sup> you did it to me.’

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (741)

This is the last Sunday of the church year, Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday. It's a relatively new church feast day. First celebrated in 1925, it began as a Roman rite. The pope instituted it in response to the rise of ultranationalism in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Mussolini had been Prime Minister for three years at that point, but his Fascist agenda had already taken shape, and it was making all the worse the strained relationship between the Vatican and the Kingdom of Italy, now the nation-state of Italy. This strain would eventually lead to Vatican City becoming a sovereign state, which would further enable Italy to go full-Fascist under Mussolini. Now formally unmoored from any of its Christian past, Italy could answer to other, darker demands.

But this was happening everywhere—ultranationalism, which maybe you know. In a strange, split-screen reality, while much of the Western World was having a roaring time of the 20s, also across Europe, ultranationalist leaders were, in more countries than not, making their claims of national supremacy, and employing terror and violence to the end of establishing hegemonic power.

Germany, Hungary, Greece, Croatia, Romania: this mytho-political fervor that overtook so many nations wasn't merely an appeal to patriotism. It was far more primitive than that. It tapped not simply into human reason and sentiment, but into human pride and shame and fear and thrall and group identity and *ressentiment*, and therefore had a quasi-religious quality to it all. Such movements and their leaders would generate deeply mythicized narratives of their pasts, periods of cultural or political supposed greatness or of being victimized by enemies in old scores that they would now propose to settle.

They would further support these mythologies with vulgarized versions of social and hard sciences such as anthropology, evolutionary biology, and genetics.

Eugenics played a particular role, those with political power attempting to alter the gene pool to make the whole population more in line with political ideals—promoting the breeding of some people while prohibiting the breeding of many others. By this it would be “proven:” their nation of people really was the best!

But, again, maybe you know this.

I say it all now, though, because it's usefully remembered as the backdrop: what the pope was up to in declaring this feast day, and what we might understand ourselves up to when we celebrate it.

The kingship of Christ might not resonate with us. I know it doesn't easily with me. I have to strain to come to some understanding of why a king might hold appeal to people, and why Christ as king might be a powerful appeal in the life of this, my faith, our faith.

For what it's worth, it doesn't seem like an altogether easy symbol in scripture either. Kings have a sketchy record in the biblical witness, beginning from when the Lord God declared Godself the king of the people Israel and Judea. But eventually they protested too much. They wanted to be like other nations. They wanted to have a king, a real, embodied, historical king, one who could fight and win wars and could prove to other nations how real and powerful this small network nations, Israel and Judea and the other twelve tribes, could also be.

Finally, the Lord acquiesced, allowed the people to have their king, even chose and saw to the anointing of a new king. Saul would be the first, but would prove inept. David would come next, and would exemplify for all time what a king should be. Just brutal enough to cow people into obeying, but also apparently one who would relent, one even who could love.

That said, there's hardly a full embrace of monarchic power in the Bible. Really, there's hardly an embrace of any sort of earthly power in the Bible. Just as soon as we see power consolidated and exercised, we see it broken down. Beginning with the ancient story of the tower of Babel, we see a divine ambivalence about whether human beings should have power, indeed a divine wisdom that human beings can have too much power, should be given obstacle to having too much power. Even Ezekiel, in evoking the sort of leadership David exemplified, relied on the image of a shepherd more than a king.

As for how Jesus would manifest his kingship, to the degree it was ever recognized as such, it would be in service, and indeed sometimes in the form of one needing such service. The kingly power of Christ would be manifest in the hungry needing food and the stranger needing welcome.

It's easy to get hung up in this gospel reading on the mention of eternal punishment. It's easy to have this be the only thing in this reading heard. Or at least I've found that easy in the past. If you have too, please consider this perspective. This is the only time in all of scripture there is any mention of eternal punishment. This is the only mention in all of the Bible of a place intended for such a thing.

It shouldn't surprise us that this is to be found in Matthew's gospel, nor should it surprise us that Jesus speaks of such a thing toward the end of his life. Matthew's gospel presents Jesus as uniquely angry at the religious authorities of his day. The ones whose vocation in life it is to open

a way for the people to return to their Lord, to live as God has intended from the beginning: these ones so ordained had become more a stumbling block in the way.

And lest we think this is some unique indictment against *Jewish* religious authorities, consider please for a minute how utterly corrupt so many Christian authorities have shown themselves to be in our day. The corruption of religious authorities isn't a uniquely Jewish problem, though these sorts of stories in the New Testament have been used to fuel antisemitism. The corruption of religious authorities is a problem in every religion of every time. It is yet another iteration of the problem of too much power in human hands.

It is suspected in scholarly circles that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew was an observant Jew, though also a common man, perhaps indeed a tax collector. For being basic but hopeful, for being himself (as a collector of taxes) the subject of suspicion and even disdain, he might have really resented that he seemed more pure of heart than a lot of Pharisees were. Just like the church lady who makes the coffee every week, runs the annual rummage sale every summer, crochets the Christmas decorations for the holiday fair, and prays the Lord's Prayer whenever she has moment of stillness, but who sees her own pastor yelling at parishioners, complaining about the coffee, and berating everyone to dig a little deeper into their pockets for their annual pledge: she might begin to think her church isn't serving her in the right spirit, that maybe the whole professional class of religionists are as disappointing as the professional class of every so-called servant of the people.

So, Matthew, and Matthew's depiction of Jesus: he has a unique sense of outrage for the hypocrites of cultic practice. When imperial authorities show themselves as self-serving and corrupt, as brutal and inhuman, you expected as much. But when those qualities show up in ones professing the Lord as their king, you begin to wonder, you begin to get angry.

Then there's the fact that Jesus, at this point in his earthly ministry, is feeling the press of time upon him.

He'd come, according to Matthew, with a deliberate mission of forming on earth a body of people who would do the works of the gospel, would tell the truth of the gospel of God whose power is manifest most truly in service, whose power is expressed most absolutely in vulnerability, himself being vulnerable even to the point of the cross. He'd come to gather the *ekklesia*, the church, a realm on earth in which is professed and confessed and expressed the gracious will of God, a politics that stands in contrast the politics of every other gathering of people the world has ever known.

And time was getting short.

And the people were proving fickle and forgetful and frightened and confused, just as much as any other people. He'd spent all this time with the likes of Peter—Peter who was to be the bedrock of the church! And Peter was still as unreliable as ever.

And time was getting short.

And shorter still.

This is the last story Jesus is remembered according to Matthew to have told. From this, there would come the Last Supper and then his arrest.

He doesn't seem entirely convinced that this *ekklesia* would work. He doesn't seem entirely convinced that the people could be persuaded to look for the living Christ among the poor and the imprisoned and the wandering lost.

Which is the point of this story—that the world should look for the living Christ among the poor and the imprisoned and the wandering lost, that the church should look for the living Christ among the poor and the imprisoned and the wandering lost. Don't spend your time in the palaces, church: spend your time in the prisons. Don't hobnob in the halls of power, go, go to the places where suffering is a pressing reality in need of urgent relief. This is where you'll find Christ: this is where we'll find Christ.

And let's not get too hung up on the one mention in all of Scripture of eternal punishment—because our faith should find expression not in what we're afraid of but in among whom we're willing to search and find.

The ultranationalist movements that marked the inter-war West were as extremely other than this as anything in history. The raw, unbridled identification with power in its most inhumane, brutal forms should shock the system, should have shocked the system. I imagine it was such a shock that the pope meant to administer in declaring such a feast day as this: Christ the King Sunday, or the Reign of Christ Sunday.

It didn't quite work, of course. The problem of ultranationalism was just getting started in 1925. There would follow, of course, twenty years of the worst of history's crimes, the mechanization of torment and death to be found in the camps across Eastern Europe. The "liberation" of these might be what actually, finally administered that terrible shock. "What have we done?"

"What have we done?"

But even that would last only for a time. We're drifting back. We are finding appeal in nationalism once again, with its talk of vermin and its grotesque identification with cruel power, as if we've forgotten how that all ends, how it inevitably ends.

If you're like me, then then the Kingship of Christ doesn't resonate easily with you.

If you're like me, then the whole notion of a king to rule the people, is when not corrupt and potentially dangerous, is any way quaint and utterly nostalgic. It doesn't hold true. We're far too disenchanted for a politics founded on ancient rites and showy mysticisms. We're far too familiar with Monty Python's critique of it all, that "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government," that you "can't expect to wield supreme executive power just 'cause some watery tart threw a sword at you!" No, "Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony." (Sorry. I had to commit to the bit, if not to the accent.)

And yet, here we go again with a politics that defies reason. So much of our global, national politics seems best summed up as magical thinking, and in more than a few cases that magic is *dark*.

And I'm no pope. My declaring, or at least my informing you, that today is the feast day in honor of *Christ* our King will hardly have the effect that that nearly century-old declaration did, to the degree that *that* had any effect.

The world will have its way, it's brutal, destructive, death-dealing way—for a time. The world will have its orgies of cruel power and death—for a time.

But then the smoke will disperse, and the dark magic will clear the system, and the power of the mob will melt away and the one whose voice gives energy to the mob will grow hoarse or tiresome, and what will be left to endure is love—which doesn't excuse so much destruction in the meantime, but might have us check out of that orgy early to give ourselves instead to what endures, which is love.

What endures is love.

This is the confession that attends any confession that Christ is King, that what endures is love—the human need for it, our need to receive of it and our need to offer it, which rises all the way to what our king needs as well. To give and to receive love, to participate in a life-giving dynamic of love, to live our days amidst the reign of love.

The church year ends here, amidst what endures: love. Next Sunday, the new year will begin here too, amidst what endures: love. In the time that intervenes, there also endures this: love.

Thanks be to God.