

The sovereignty of Christ

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Feast of Christ the King, November 26, 2017.

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.' Matthew 25:40

Watching Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade reminded me how much I love a good parade. When I lived in the nation's capital, I watched five presidential inaugural parades marching down Pennsylvania Avenue with bands and floats from each state led by their governor.

By contrast, a presidential inauguration is relatively simple compared to the impressive English coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey. With all the pageantry of that ancient English tradition the high point in that solemn ceremony occurs when the jeweled crown is taken from the high altar and placed on the head of the monarch whose authority is from God. While the office of the presidency has become far more imperious in nature than was originally intended, the concept of a kingdom and a monarch is foreign to most Americans. Christ the king or Christus Rex is portrayed in the cross high above our chancel with Christ with a crown and dressed in kingly robes. The significance his kingship refers to his power over the forces of evil and death.

If we expect to be part of the realm of God we must first make Christ's life our life. We must never neglect to remember those who are homeless and go hungry, the poorly clothed, the sick, and those who have no one to visit them. The simple fact is that when we reach out to those in need we do so for Christ.

The face of Christ is in those who come to food pantries, in those who seek refuge from domestic violence and in the shelters for the homeless where meals are served. When we respond to those in need, it is Christ to whom we respond. It is because of the grace and mercy of those who apply their faith in practical ways that many lost souls are given hope and encouragement. It follows that mercy is given to the merciful.

Over the main altar of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome is Michelangelo's masterful work, The Last Judgment. It is based on today's gospel about Christ separating the righteous from the unrighteous as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The righteous are welcomed into the kingdom while the unrighteous are condemned to the depths. When the time comes for the sheep to be separated from the goats, there are no mixed breeds.

The legend of Martin of Tours is about a soldier in the Roman army in the fourth century not long after the conversion of Constantine and the end the persecution of Christians. Martin came upon a beggar who was cold and hungry. Having no money to give him, he took his cloak and cut it in half and gave the other half to the beggar to keep warm. That night, he had a dream that it was Christ to whom he had given the portion of his cloak. After being baptized, Martin the soldier in the Roman army became a soldier for Christ.

In the end, we will not be judged on how often we were in church, how many scripture verses we memorized, the number of charities we supported, or the good deeds we did. Instead, we will be judged by how faithful we were in our everyday witness to Christ. Part of being in a right relationship with God is to stand for justice among all people.

An anonymous author paraphrased today's gospel in these lines:

I was hungry and you formed a humanities club to discuss my hunger.

I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to pray for my release.

I was poorly clothed and you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you thanked God for your own health.

I was homeless and you told me of the shelter of God's love.

I was lonely and you left me alone.

You seem so holy, so close to God but I am still hungry, lonely, cold, and in pain.

There is no room in God's realm for abusive and manipulative behavior, no room for those who play mind games by exercising power over their victims. Predators who prey on innocent minors through domestic violence, rape and abuse don't care about the devastating effect it has on them. Battered wives are made to feel that they deserve it and that they are responsible for their husband's anger and violent behavior. Rape victims are made to feel that it is their fault by the way they are dressed. Demonic behavior in all forms has no place in the realm of God. Instances of misconduct must be reported before any more harm is done. If we are a people of wholeness and integrity we must maintain standards of respect for all people.

The prophet Ezekiel portrays David as shepherd king who cares for his flock. He rescues them when they stray and brings them to rich pastures for grazing. He will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. Justice will be given to the weak and ravaged.

Christ's kingly rule allows no claim of privilege on our part. Christ the king is not a majestic figure sitting on a throne. Instead, he accompanies us on our journeys and shares our burdens in our everyday struggles. Rather than living in regal splendor, he is present with us in the everyday. He empowers the poor, the displaced, the oppressed, and the outcast. When we advocate for the powerless and those who suffer because of gender, race, ethnic origin or sexuality, we act in the name of Christ.

In George Bernard Shaw's play, *The Devil's Disciple* the worse sin is not to hate people, but to be indifferent to them. Indifference is the essence of inhumanity. The more we practice compassion, the more we realize our capacity for it.

I love a good parade. But the Christian life is not sitting and watching the parade of life go by. It is getting off the sidelines and marching with Christ who leads us on to victory.