

Ezekiel 34: 11-16
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1: 15-23
St. Matthew 25: 31-46

Feast of the Reign of Christ the King 2023

“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.’”

St. Matthew 25: 34

I understand that in Scotland, Christmas Day is an important celebration. In that culture, though, New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day are a period of celebration which rivals even Christmas! It’s thought to be a time to reflect on the past, and to prepare for the future...

Most of us don’t give much thought to the seasons of the year, except that some of us look forward to spring, when we’re trudging carefully on slippery, icy sidewalks. Let’s begin this morning, though, by thinking about the seasons of the Church year... Yes – just as we Canadians observe the seasons of spring, summer, fall and winter, so too many Christian churches have special seasons of focus. The seasons of the Church aren’t silly useless frippery. Observing the seasons are meant to help us draw closer to Jesus Christ, and to live together as his Church family...

The Church new year begins with the season of Advent, which begins this coming Sunday. We prepare for the celebration of Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Advent isn’t meant to be a season of great celebration – it’s more about *waiting*, about getting ready... How many of us were tempted as kids to peek at the Christmas presents before Christmas morning?... But there can be a spiritual benefit to waiting; anticipating; getting ready... As Christians, are we willing to resist decorating for Christmas before Hallowe’en? Are we willing to exercise that spiritual discipline of waiting; of anticipating?... I suggest it can be spiritually healthy to develop the discipline of waiting...

Then of course comes Christmas; and then Epiphany (when we celebrate that the wonderful news of Jesus Christ is not just for 1 nation, but for all nations; all peoples...) Lent helps us get ready for Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter season. Every Sunday is meant to be a little celebration that Jesus Christ is no longer dead, but alive; he reigns in heaven and is praying for us all, along with all the company of the saints...

Then comes the gift of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost season). The quiet, regular part of the Church year which started before Lent picks up from about June to the end of November. The first part of the Church year is about what God has done for us. The second part of the Church year, more or less, is what *we do* in response to God’s gift of his Son...

The colours we decorate the Church building with are significant... We note that the Church building is decorated in white today – the colour of celebration. We also use white for the celebrations of Christmas, Easter, weddings, and so on. White is the colour of celebration...

We can think of grass growing when we see the green liturgical colour. God doesn't change. *We're* supposed to change – to grow spiritually, to develop the priorities of Christ himself. Then, with the “P”s for “purple” in Lent, and we can think of other “P” words like Prayer, Penitence, and Preparation...

Next month we will have deep blue for Advent, and there is also Red – a few high-church parishes even use gold on Easter morning and black for Good Friday... So, these liturgical colours are meant to be little nudges, visual cues, about how to walk more closely with God...

By now you've probably figured out that today is the last Sunday of the Church liturgical year. It's a bit like New Year's Eve. You and I are invited to consider today what it means to confess that Jesus Christ is our true *King*; our perfect Sovereign...

Let's think about this for a moment: Why does the liturgical year end with a celebration, that Jesus Christ is King?...

Could it be that the climax of our response to all that God has done is to celebrate the truth of our relationship: God is to be our true King!... The rulers of this earth do not have the final say. (Nations come and go.) God himself was; and is; and is to come; world without end...

By his Spirit, you and I become adopted sons and daughters of the true King. Wonder of wonders, that makes you and me adopted “princes” and “princesses” in his kingdom, within the risen Christ's realm of authority... (If we're having a bad day, don't let that get us down. Let's recall, we are the adopted sons and daughters of the true King...)

“The Upside-down King” is a kind of mythology tale by East Indian author Sudha Murty... But I'd like to suggest that Christians need to think about kingship and kingdom in a kind of upside-down way: Not of course that Jesus is “upside-down,” but that Jesus Christ has turned upside-down our common values and assumptions about what it means to be sons and daughters of the true King...

We often associate royalty with finery and jewelry and crowns and worldly status. But the Lord Jesus certainly did not have worldly status... He had no place to lay his head. He was reviled, tortured and murdered by an angry crowd; his crown was one of thorns...

The Lord Jesus taught his followers that our priorities are not about our status or worldly wealth... Here are 2 passages from Matthew 19, which the Tuesday evening Bible study has been looking at: “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’” Also,

Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. (19: 14; 29-30)

The common perception in ancient Palestine is that the Messiah, the Christ, would come, drive away the Roman occupiers, and occupy a new kingdom for God’s people... but that wasn’t God’s plan, was it? Instead, the Messiah surrendered himself to a brutal death. The religious people of the time thought that death was the end. Instead, Jesus Christ is risen to new life. As we belong to him, we share in the inheritance of his kingdom...

Today’s gospel passage is the third of 3 parables in Matthew 25, about our King’s return. Jesus Christ makes it as plain as plain can be that a key priority of belonging to his kingdom is, how we treat one another – especially, how we treat those who are poor, naked, imprisoned, lonely, hungry or thirsty...

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; 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, 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...” 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 (vv. 34-36, 40).”

In contrast to the blessed are those who didn’t bother to care:

“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.” 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?” 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 (vv. 41-45).”

So, we see there are eternal consequences, depending on whether or not we live out the priorities of Christ’s kingdom: “And these [who did not care] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (v. 46)...’

Do we see that, when we proclaim Christ as our true King, when we belong to him and serve him, we are his adopted children?... We are taking on a way of believing, and a way of life, which is in sharp contrast with the priorities of the world around us... “The last will be first...”

May we live graciously, generously and joyously, in the priorities of Christ’s kingdom. He is the true King of kings, to whom belongs all honour. It is not because of anything we have done, but through God’s sheer grace and mercy, that we are his spiritually adopted sons and daughters. May we live for him, as he lives in us; now and for ever.

Amen.