

When the King Returns...

Matthew 25:31-46

Christ the King Sunday

Today is the final day of the Christian liturgical year. The Christian year begins with Advent, which is the joyful time of waiting for our Savior's coming, and it ends with Christ the King Sunday. On this day, we celebrate the Lordship of Christ over the Earth and the whole creation in the coming of God's kin-dome. Of course, the assigned gospel reading for this Sunday doesn't sound exciting or joyful because it's about the judgment, the final judgment.

"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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left."(31-33)

I am pretty sure no one would enjoy the judgment. As you know, Juhee recently passed her ordination interview. As you can imagine, she became more anxious as the interview date came closer. Juhee knew this interview was important, but it was not a matter of life and death. Still, an interview is an interview, and she was nervous about it. When she got the call that she had passed the interview, she was elated! Even a simple job interview can make us anxious. How would you feel to stand before the Son of Man as he separated people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats? Which side do you want to be on? Right-hand side! How can one get to the right-hand side? The king said, "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." To feed and serve the least among us!

Unlike a job interview, this final interview or the final judgment is a matter of life and death, so our attention would quickly move to another question. "Have I done enough to serve others in need to stand on the right-hand side?" Many of us would be anxious about the final judgment because we often feel that we are not good enough, have not done enough. But my friends, I tell you with confidence that this kind of understanding is a common misunderstanding of this text. How are we saved? We are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus. We don't earn salvation. Salvation is God's free gift. Do not be anxious about earning a high enough score to get into the kin-dom of God.

To Nation

This biblical text is not about one more ethical judgment scene about helping the least otherwise, you will be doomed. "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. All the nations will be gathered before him." First, the ones being judged are not Jesus' disciples nor Jewish Christians but "the nations," which was a typical term for the gentiles. David Jacobsen wrote, "the question that Matthew's Jesus handles in this vision is not about the ethics of the church or even Jesus' disciples, but the response to the least of these on the part of the nations, the gentiles... What concerns this judgment is not the ethics of the faithful, but the judgment of the gentiles: those who would either respond positively or negatively to the "little ones," the "least of these" that make up Christ's community."¹ Are you feeling better now? This vision of final judgment gave hope to the early church who experienced brutal persecution from the world. Many Christians would like to know that the Son of Man, the King, the Shepherd, has got their community's back, ultimately.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46-6>

What about us?

Then, what about us? The Son of Man, the King, has our back and we are saved by God's unconditional grace! We are the ones who are blessed by God so does that mean we are done with the final judgment? As the blessed ones, we are called to embody Jesus' teaching by performing acts of loving-kindness. We are called to take care of the poor and the disadvantaged, not because we want to be saved but because we have already been saved. We are called to welcome the despised and provide food for the hungry not because we want to enter the kin-dom of heaven but because we are already living out the kin-dom among us. God's kin-dom is a place where God's will is fully realized and we can foretaste it here on earth whenever and wherever God's will is done among us, no matter how small or trivial it may seem.

One clergy from the New York Conference shared what their young adult group has been doing. Similar to our ABC bag ministry, a small group of young adults decided to serve homeless people on the street. They made care packages and coffee and went to New York on Christmas morning. Some told them, "Spending the holidays homeless is incredibly hard as if being homeless wasn't already hard enough."² Loneliness, depression, the feeling of being left alone and being forgotten, are especially hard during the bright holiday season. As Christians, these young men and women are serving neighbors in need. By the way, they are first generation Korean immigrants, so just like me, their English is not perfect. While they shared care packages with people living on the street, one young group member noticed an old woman who seemed to be carrying many burdens, so he offered a prayer for her in his broken English. Can you guess what happened? In return, this homeless lady living on the street offered him her prayer. They held each other's hands and prayed together. As he listened to her sincere prayer for him, he couldn't hold back his tears and the entire team shed tears. In their sharing and praying together, they saw not a homeless woman but a person who God dearly loves. In that encounter, they experienced what it means to be a loving community in Christ.

It has been said, "Nobody is so poor he has nothing to give, and nobody is so rich he has nothing to receive." We all need one another and as we follow Jesus' footsteps, serving the poor, taking care of the oppressed and welcoming strangers, we don't unilaterally give, but we also receive. We become blessings for one another.

By serving others, we have seen our King who is not like the kings of this world. We have seen our King who brings real peace, who sees the poor and hungry, and who hears the cries of the oppressed. In God's kin-dom, no one is hungry, naked, sick, or alone. By serving others, we foretaste the joy of God's kin-dom. To bear witness to Christ as King is to be a messenger of this kin-dom—to serve others and thereby profess the coming of God's glorious kin-dom.

My Asbury family. I am glad that Asbury has been pretty good at serving our neighbors especially during this holiday season. Food for Soul, mittens, socks and hat collections, Elves for elders, Asbury Bags of Care, prayer circles, card ministry... Asbury has embodied our faith and followed our Christ. We share Christ's love by serving others who may have no one to care for them. As Mother Teresa said, "Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest you." When our King returns, Christ will say, "'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things... Come and share your master's happiness!'" (23) Remember no matter what trials lay ahead of us, our King has got our back ultimately! So let us keep up our good works until our King returns. Amen.

² <https://invisiblepeople.tv/what-it-feels-like-to-be-homeless-for-the-holidays/>