

Last Pentecost, Yr. A

November 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 15:31-46

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, which is designated as Christ the King Sunday. That seems highly appropriate as, for the last weeks, we've been hearing end-of-time scriptures and it's good to be reminded that, at some point, the Christ who has been king over all creation from the beginning, will make that kingship explicit. As C.S. Lewis said, at some point, the author will walk on to the stage and the play will be over.

Of course, we aren't at the end of time yet, so we see God's kingdom as a dynamic, unfolding process. But the scriptures remind us that the Kingdom is BOTH – it's here, it's "at hand," as Jesus said, but also not completed. It's hidden now, Matthew says elsewhere, like a treasure buried in a field, or yeast in a batch of bread dough. Robert Capon says that it's like an iceberg – at best we can see 10% of it, as it occasionally becomes visible in history. But in the end, we'll see all of it. The other 90% that's below the surface will be revealed.

But we also know what we are being asked, or better, being given the opportunity, to do – to live in that kingdom right now. The Ephesians reading says that Christ is already ruler of the world and Paul prays that his readers will have wisdom and revelation as they come to know Christ so that with **THE EYES OF YOUR HEARTS ENLIGHTENED**, you'll understand, you'll know hope, you'll know your inheritance, you'll know the greatness of God's power.

So, today is all about the kingdom. If we start with the Ezekiel reading, we can see a picture of what a true king, a true

ruler, will be like. The OT scholar Walter Brueggeman points out that that should be our guide for good leadership right now— in government, in corporations, in the church: seeking the lost, bringing back the strays, binding up the injured, strengthening the weak, feeding the hungry.

“In a word,” he says, “good leadership consists in the restoration of the common good so that all members of the community, strong and weak, rich and poor, may live together in a common shalom of shared resources.” That’s the OT vision of the kingdom. And it’s just as relevant today as it was then.

As you know, Jesus’ central message was about the Kingdom of God. I’d like to point out that this is often translated as Kingdom of Heaven which leads to some confusion.

Because it’s not about heaven as some after-this-life, far-off place. Instead it’s about the condition that occurs and will fully occur when God’s reign is established throughout the world. We pray for that over and over: thy kingdom come.

In writing about this, N.T. Wright talks about the fact that many Christians think that the big question is whether they will go to heaven. Wright points out that the Bible actually has very little to say about heaven and even less to say about hell. John Calvin, in his almost 1500 pages of theology, has 2 paragraphs about heaven and 1 paragraph about hell. We talked last week about the wrong question being WHEN will the end come. Here’s another wrong question (or at least secondary)— will I go to heaven?

I suggested last week (and maybe even the week before) that the better question is that if the end is coming, the Day of Lord, and if I can see that there’s a huge gap between what IS and

WHAT GOD WANTS, what should I be doing in the meantime. What should I be doing to bridge that gap?

And the reading from Matthew that we hear today answers that question loud and clear. Take care of one another, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger. When I read this, I can't help but think that, as valuable as theology and doctrinal statements can be, as valuable as beliefs, right action is what we're called to. Our beliefs are meant to lead to action. And, thinking about that as Matthew lays it out, it's really pretty simple. Take care of one another.

I think one of the most interesting things about this Matthew passage is how surprised everyone is. The ones who took care of the needs of others were just as surprised as those who ignored them. None of them realized that they were dealing with Christ.

Those who did nothing thought that the people before them were not their problem, or perhaps they thought they were too insignificant to bother with. If we'd known it was YOU, Jesus, we surely would have done something. And Jesus is saying: it WAS me.

Somewhere along the line I read a story about a group that was on some kind of retreat gathering. Unfortunately, I can't remember where I read it, so I may not have the details right. But, as I remember, at one point in the session, participants were told to put up a picture of the person they disliked (maybe even hated) the most and then they were invited to throw darts at the picture. I'm sure most of them thought that was great fun. But when they were finished, the leader took down the picture they had posted and underneath each of them was a picture of Christ, now marked by the darts they had thrown. A powerful wake-up call, right? And yet,

each of us has someone in our life who is difficult, or just plain unlikeable. Someone in whom it's really hard to see the face of Christ. That reminds me of the license plate that says GOD LOVES YOU AND I'M TRYING. Again, we always need to remember that love isn't necessarily a warm feeling but rather a recognition of connection and therefore, responsibility.

I mentioned people being surprised earlier. But, when you think about it, this whole project is a surprise: God creating the world out of love, Jesus becoming incarnate, joining us in our humanity, the reality shown to us in the cross and resurrection that love is more powerful than death. Or we could think of the beatitudes from a few weeks ago, those statements that turn conventional thinking upside down. Surprises all around!

Here's one more surprise. I think you all know that I'm not up on a lot of pop culture, including the latest sports news. And I think it's safe to say that I know next to nothing about rap music. But a family member has sent me some stuff on a Korean boy band, called BTS. I have no idea what their name means in Korea, but in English their name translates into bulletproof boy scouts. They have taken the pop music world by storm, winning award after award. But they are here in this sermon as a reminder that the Kingdom breaks in, often where we would least expect it. Apparently, their music deals with such things as empowerment, injustice and other social issues. And they have a huge following who have been inspired to go out and make a difference in the world. And they are all over the world. The interview I saw had people from the US, Sweden, the Philippines, and Saudi Arabia. They network and raise money for refugees and

NGOs. The latest project raised \$1 Million for Black Lives Matter. And just like the Matthew scripture, where just a cup of water makes all the difference, these people see themselves as one of many: many people, each contributing a small amount, but leading to a significant impact. It gladdens the heart, doesn't it?

And, finally, one more thing. I read this article some time ago and have saved it because it was too good not to share. I haven't found exactly the right scripture for it, however. But thinking of glimpses of the kingdom and things that gladden the heart, I decided to include it here.

It's from a news clip that described a trio of penguins who were bored by the covid lockdown at their zoo. So they were taken on a private tour of an art gallery in Kansas City to "enrich and stimulate" them. The zoo CEO arranged the trip and said that the penguins waddled through the empty galleries, gazing at the paintings. It was noted that they liked Caravaggio more than Monet.

I'm not sure if that's a picture of the peaceable kingdom, but it certainly does gladden the heart. Amen.