

## The Covert King

Ephesians 1:15-23 and Matthew 25:31-46

Preached FCCW November 26, 2017 (Christ the King Sunday)

There is a story that comes to us from out of the 16th century about a great leader of the church by the name of Bishop Hugh Latimer.

One Sunday morning he entered his pulpit and looked out to see King Henry VIII in the congregation.

I'm guessing that Old Henry wasn't hard to spot out there in the pews.

He might have worn his crown and carried his scepter.

At the very least, he would have been wearing his Sunday best, which is saying something when you're talking about a King's wardrobe.

You might think that Bishop Latimer would have been greatly honored at the unexpected presence of his sovereign monarch in his church.

Except that he knew that the sermon he prepared to preach that day would not go well with King Henry.

He thought for a moment and then said to himself, but out loud for all to hear, "Latimer, be careful what you say today; King Henry is here."

Almost as quickly as Latimer felt the pressure to tailor the sermon he was ready to preach so that it would not offend King Henry, something reminded him of another monarch who was also in attendance.

This king was the one Paul described in his letter to the Ephesians, whose throne is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."

And with that, he thought for a moment longer, and seeming to draw strength from it, he again said to himself, but aloud so others could hear, "Latimer, be careful what you say today; the King of kings is here."

This King of kings, whose presence gave Latimer the courage to do the right thing, to speak the truth of God to the power of Henry the VIII, was, is, and always will be Jesus.

Which is why we celebrate Christ the King Sunday.

But, Jesus is a covert king.

He doesn't look the part of a monarch.

The only crown anybody ever saw him wear was a crown of thorns.

The only official recognition of his sovereignty was a sign mockingly referring him as "King of the Jews," that was nailed to the cross on which he died.

Most people who ever met him while he was alive, were clueless that he was any kind of king at all.

That's something that has never changed.

And, if you believe Jesus' own words it never will.

At least not before Judgment Day.

Only then, will Jesus be seen in all his glory.

But do you know what the biggest surprise of all will be?

That he was always right there in front of our own noses; but we missed him because we were looking for him in the wrong places.

Jesus describes this scene where he is seated on a throne with angels around him and all the people who ever lived gathered before him.

And like a shepherd separates the sheep in his flock from the goats, Jesus will separate people into two groups.

Those who are blessed to enter the Kingdom, and those who are left out.

What determines who goes where is how they treated Jesus.

To the sheep he says: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

To the goats he says: when I was hungry and thirsty and naked, you didn't feed me or give me something to drink, or something to wear. When I was a stranger you turned your back on me. When I was sick or in prison you ignored me.

For all that divided the sheep from the goats, they shared one very important thing in common.

Neither the sheep nor the goats ever realized that what they did or did not do for these people, they were in reality doing or not doing for Jesus.

They will say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or naked and offer you food, drink and clothing?"

When did we see you lonely, sick or languishing in prison and bring you comfort?"

And when did we see you in these places and not lift a finger?"

With any other King or Queen, or Prime Minister or President, you know where they can be found. In palaces or mansions.

They can be found in the spotlight.

Jesus says, if you want to find me don't look up, look down.

Don't look for me where there is wealth and power.

Seek me where there is poverty and need.

In a way, this needn't come as such a big surprise.

Once, when someone asked Jesus what was the most important commandment, Jesus couldn't answer the man with a single commandment.

Instead, he said the most important commandment is to love God with every fiber and faculty of your being; but alongside that it was no less important to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Jesus' answer to the question asked by the sheep and the goats tells us that loving him and loving each other is not an either/or proposition.

The two things are mutually inclusive!

When you love your neighbour through acts of compassion and community, you are loving Jesus at the same time.

That doesn't mean that we need to start every day with a menu of good deeds to perform.

Feed a hungry person, welcome a stranger, send a get well card, visit a prisoner are not items on a checklist for maintaining a good standing with Jesus.

The Good News of the Bible is that salvation comes by God's grace, not through our works of charity.

The most distinctive thing about this story of the final judgment is that the sheep's good deeds towards others were not done with an ulterior motive related to their own salvation.

They were authentic acts of mercy, for mercy's sake.

They were not performed under compulsion to satisfy a Commandment in order to obtain eternal life; but were an expression of the life of Jesus already living within them.

In the end, what separated the sheep from the goats was not so much what was done or not done for others; but who, responded to human need by caring, and who couldn't care less.

We've all experienced times when we might have made a difference for someone in need, and didn't act on it.

Maybe you've even deliberately gone out of your way to avoid assisting a stranger.

There could be times when your giving was done reluctantly or with resentment.

Or with the motivation of impressing others.

We can't get away from the fact that there is a little bit of goat in all of us.

The Church is where we learn to recognize this Covert King named Jesus in the needs of the world around us.

It is where our relationship with him transforms our relationships with others.

It is where we ourselves evolve from goats to sheep, who serve Christ by serving the least of his children.

We accomplish that, not only through acts of charity to relieve suffering, but also through working for justice so that the sources of suffering are lessened.

By building and maintaining economic and political systems that do not ignore those who lack basic human needs and opportunities.

There's something in this story about the division of the sheep and goats that might initially make us feel uncomfortable, but which is actually a reason for great hope.

When Jesus blesses the sheep he bids them to inherit the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.

If the kingdom is inherited, that means it wasn't earned through the good deeds they performed.

It was always intended to be their eternal home.

When Jesus separates the goats from the sheep, he tells them to depart from him.

But, they had already departed from him by ignoring him in the least of the least.

It's not so much a judgment Jesus makes on them, but a judgment they have made for themselves.

Here's the hopeful part, though it doesn't hopeful at first glance.

Jesus describes perpetual alienation from him as an "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Notice who it is and who it isn't prepared for.

It doesn't say that it is prepared for people. Not even goats.

It is prepared for the devil and his angels.

If the devil and his angels represent the source and reality of all that is opposed to God's mercy and justice, then this tells us that in the final judgment all the sources of human suffering will be permanently removed.

What is never removed is God's steadfast hope that all God's children will eventually come to know the King of Kings, to whom their true allegiance belongs.

That's what we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday.

Not that Christ is a king whose wrath we have to tip toe around, the way Latimer's first impulse was to fear King Henry.

But that, God has truly put all other powers and authorities under Christ's feet; namely the powers and authorities that are responsible for human misery and injustice.

And victory over those powers is certain and inevitable.

For the foreseeable future, the world will likely go on lacking compassion for the needs of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

But there will also continue to be sheep who, recognizing that the King of kings is present, and drawing strength from that, will respond to their needs with compassion *and* justice.

Which may even help the **goats** to eventually recognize Jesus in the places and faces where they've never noticed him before.

