

What kind of king is he, this Jesus? That's the question we grapple on this day in our church calendar that we call The Reign of Christ.

Hopefully we can all accept that the image of the risen Christ as King over the nations is a metaphor – a picture way of talking about Christ's divine authority and power.

Every metaphor has both a "like" and an "unlike" in the comparison that it's making. A human mother might be described using the metaphor of a wild bear protecting her cubs. The "like" part of that metaphor is that she is fierce and brave and protective towards her children. The "unlike" part of that metaphor is that she has no fur or claws and is probably not going to actually kill and eat anyone. Both "like" and "unlike."

The problem with our metaphors and images for God is that we sometimes forget about the "unlike," and start imagining God as being almost completely "like" our human pictures of God, only bigger. Our language of "king" suffers from this problem. Nothing that we know or have experienced of human monarchy or leadership gives us an accurate picture of what it means for Christ to "rule." There is more "unlike" than "like" in the metaphor of Christ as king for the simple reason that all human rulers, even the best of them, wield power as limited, damaged humans within systems that are at least partly corrupt, sinful, or greedy. That might not be the fullness of what's going on, but it will always be a component of that person's rule.

Whereas Christ's rule is unlike anything we've experienced from human power, and it is full of understanding and tenderness, as well as perfect justice and overflowing abundance and gift, completely untainted by human weakness and stupidity.

Our Gospel reading today is a story that is both "like" and "unlike" what we might expect from Christ's judgement of the nations. The key is not to focus on the dividing into two groups and welcoming one and casting out the other. This is simply the background story structure that's duplicated from the other parables we've been listening to recently. It's just the coat hanger that the actual garment, the important part of story, is hanging on. The dividing of the sheep and goats to their eternal destiny is there to raise the sense of urgency, to compel self-critique, but the point of the story is...on what basis are people being divided? And what does that tell us about who we are and who God is?

In this story, someone is treated as a sheep or a goat based on how they respond to the physical needs of those who are suffering. To some extent, we can just leave the story there. It's clear that acting mercifully toward people in need is a key expectation of the citizens of Christ's kingdom. It's how we demonstrate our identity as Christ's people and share in his reign. The definition of righteousness in the reign of Christ is to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the sick and imprisoned.

This parable wants to say something more than that, though. The story turns on the way Christ the king, *identifies himself with the needy, the overlooked and forgotten*. When we do or don't do these works of care, we are doing or not doing them *for Christ himself*.

This takes us back to the two commandments that Jesus identified as summing up the whole law and the prophets: Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself. That second commandment is often understood as "love your neighbour as well as, or as much as, you love yourself", and when we see it that way, it leads to interesting reflections on the importance of learning to love ourselves. But I think the primary meaning of "love your neighbour *as yourself*" is the awareness that *the other is the same as you*. Every person is beloved, every person is a child of God. We care for others because their value and importance is identical to our own – they matter the just as much as us in the eyes of God. And – as Jesus adds in today's parable – what happens to every person *is felt by Christ*.

We are all so connected, as human brothers and sisters, that there can be no "us" and "them." We like to think we can make this distinction. That's how we avoid our responsibilities to one another – by creating a false sense of separation between others' needs and my own. But because Christ "fills all in all," whatever happens to anyone happens to Christ and because of my connection to Christ, it happens to me, too.

We sometimes talk about how the measure of the health of a nation is how it treats its weakest citizens. This is taken even further in this image of Christ as a king who *receives in himself all the actions of both mercy and neglect that are done to his beloved*. Whenever anyone is hurt, the king is hurt. When people are cared for, the king is cared for. Can you imagine what our society would be like if our politicians knew that they would experience in their own selves the collateral consequences of all their policies?

It is normal for us to hear this parable through the ears of those who are being reminded and challenged to act mercifully to others, and that's an important take-away. But I would also like us today to consider the impact this story would have had on its original hearers – members of a struggling, suffering church, who had given up everything to follow Christ, including in some cases their health and their freedom and their very lives. And, if we go back before Matthew's community, we reach Jesus' first audience, members of an oppressed ethnic group under brutal occupation by the Romans. As we reflect on that, what if we were to hear this parable through the lens of our own experience of being small and needy, or powerless, or neglected.

Can you hear this story as saying that the judgement of the nations will be based on how people had treated *you* in your time of need and hurt? Imagine the Lord of glory standing with you – putting his arms around your shoulders and saying to the powerful and the sleek: “this one who you barely noticed, or who you are treating cruelly – with them is where I stand – this is where you will find me in the world – and whatever you do to them, you're doing to me, the Author and Ruler of creation.”

This is where, in the end, all of us find our dignity and our worth, whether we are in the position to give mercy, or greatly in need of receiving it – or both, which is the case for most of us.

This image of *Christ as a stranger needing help* tells us what Christ's kingship is really like. Forget about the thrones and sceptres and all the trappings of how we imagine unlimited regal power. Christ's reign is expressed in identification with the poor and the suffering, and in calling us to solidarity with our neighbours who *are ourselves*. And ultimately, Christ's reign is the gift of eternal life through Christ's own divine life, where there is no more hunger or thirst, no more exclusion, nakedness, illness or imprisonment. Amen.