

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Congratulations. You have made it through another church liturgical year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent and **also** the first Sunday in a new church liturgical year, the year of Mark and John. That title indicates that the majority, but certainly not all, of the gospel readings for the next year will come from the Gospels of either Mark or John. They are the two shortest of the four gospels and are traditionally considered the first gospel written, Mark, and the last gospel written, John.

The Sunday that ends each of the three liturgical years, today, is called "Christ the King" or "The Reign of Christ." In other words, we celebrate the glory of God in Jesus **immediately before** we begin Advent, which is when we focus on our anticipation and expectation of the coming birth of the baby, Jesus. Caroline Lewis in her commentary for today makes the suggestion that maybe we Christians would be better served to make our New Years resolutions this week in preparing for the new church year rather than at the traditional **calendar** new year. She asks how we might **experience** Advent, Christmas, and the New Year **differently** if our resolutions are **already** in place. Just an idea that might be appropriate and that we might at least consider.

Earlier in the week, I was talking to my Assembly of God friend, Bill, in Virginia and he wanted to know my homily topic for today. I am sure that you know by now that I very seldom title my homilies but I did tell him the texts for today and that today was titled "Christ the King" Sunday. He actually read the texts and wrote to me "After reading all four passages all I can say is there are a lot of threads to pull together." Well, welcome to my world every week, friend Bill. Actually, for me, the trick is to focus on one or two threads not all of them. That being said, I think it is safe to say that my focus today is unintentionally the same as last week – judgment and justice.

Margaret Odell begins her look at our reading from Ezekiel by saying: "The **connection** between justice and care is often lost in contemporary Christian practice." She goes on to talk about how we contemporary Christians understand the importance of care that is so adequately underscored in our gospel reading today. We find countless ways to practice charity through any number of food drives, mission trips, and so on. The **problem** is that, like in **much** of our society, we take the easy way out by simply focusing on the **symptoms** rather than on the underlying **causes** of these great needs. Now in case you are not tracking what I mean, focusing on the symptoms is simply providing care, whereas focusing on the underlying causes is about justice. Why **do** people need clothing and food and housing and hygiene products? First, yes – maybe they **did** make some bad choices. Or second, maybe it was just the luck or bad luck of the draw. Or third, maybe it is simply the unequal distribution of wealth for which there are personal and systemic reasons. In judgment we **tend** to, among other things, assign blame. In justice we no longer are concerned with blame but rather our focus is simply on **resolution** of **whatever** the issue is - both now and in the long term. Justice does not look for **quick** fixes.

Once again, our gospel reading has an eschatological theme. The initial focus is a kind of judgment where the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. David Lose in his commentary points out several things. First, both those identified as sheep and those identified as goats are **surprised** by what Jesus says. They essentially ask the very same question from a different view – when **did** we – and when **didn't** we. Both phrases capture the group shock when Jesus commends and condemns. By the way, have you ever noticed that commend and condemn use the exact same letters with the difference being the order and **which** letter is duplicated. Second, they do not actually seem surprised by Jesus' positive or negative statements. Instead they appear most surprised by their inability to recognize Jesus. This could simply be a repeat of Jewish Messianic expectations not matching the reality of Jesus. The Jews were looking for the wrong kind of Messiah in the wrong places. Third, David says this parable ultimately depicts this royal figure, Jesus, identifying with "**the least of these.**" This concept definitely undermines our tendency to associate and look for God in places of power. In other words, this parable is telling us that we may need to reconsider who and where we think God is. We might be being challenged to **reorient** ourselves to discover and experience God's presence in our lives differently and more fully than ever before.

David Lose goes on to say that this parable and the preceding parables actually are saying that Jesus' "coming in glory" **does not** anticipate some final judgment but rather describes the unexpected revelation that Jesus is actually revealed - just like it was for the centurion - **most** clearly in the cross. So, just as Jesus has been saying all along through actions and teaching - God loves us and all the world so much That God has decided to identify with **us** fully and completely.

The Bible in its entirety, but especially in the words of Jesus, says over and over again in many different phrases - do not be afraid, do not worry about tomorrow, fear not, have no fear - and so on. As the song says: "He's got the whole world in his hands..." God is in control. God has a plan. We need only to believe and trust, and **then** - act accordingly.

On Friday, I think Chad Bird hit the nail on the head by asking the following question and then providing answers. He asked: "**How in God's name are we to prepare for the end of the world?**" He then used a C. S. Lewis quote which I have included parts of here. "If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts." Chad goes on to say: "In other words, if the end of the world is coming, just keep right on loving those whom God has placed in your life. Make some breakfast for your family. Go to work and serve your customers. Play a game with your children. Call your mom. If he loves us—**which** he does—then let us love one another, fully confident that whatever goes down, the love of God in Jesus won't let us down." We are safe **and** secure in the scarred hands of Jesus. So, until the end of the world comes, let us keep on thanking God for our families and friends, for going to church and praying, and for fulfilling the duties of our vocations, and for loving and serving others as ourselves.

Some attribute the following quote to Martin Luther and some say that this is **not** a Martin Luther quote. I just do not really know and to tell you the truth I do not really care because I believe it says to us the exact frame of mind we need as Christians, not just Lutherans, in an ever-changing world. "If I believed the world were to end tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today."

Hear then the good news:

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' teaching announced and illustrated the kingdom of God.

God's kingdom does not function like a typical, **worldly** kingdom.

At the end of the day, to claim Christ as king, to believe in God's reign, has to be a claim on our **present**, and not just in our future glory of "thy kingdom come."

How we decided to live **matters**.

Not just for ourselves.

Not just for those immediately around us.

The divine reign has **already** invaded the world in us.

And it is good news – **especially** to those on the **fringes** of society.

This rule **welcomes** those who have no status and **gives** them status as heirs of the kingdom.

This rule seeks to **serve** others rather than **exploit** them.

Grace and peace to you, my friends. May you live in the kingdom today and every day, now and forever.

Amen