

Church of the Holy Apostles (Episcopal-Roman Catholic), Virginia Beach, Virginia
Last Sunday after Pentecost/Christ the King (Proper 29A RCL)
November 20, 2011

The Rev. Michael B. Ferguson, Episcopal Co-pastor
Ezekiel 34:11-16; Matthew 25:31-46

Americans can be forgiven, I think, if we're not pleased at the idea of having a king or queen rule over us. After all, repressive royal rule was one of the strong reasons why many people migrated to this continent from England and was a major motivation for the revolution that eventually led to America's independence from Great Britain. Repressive and insensitive rule also led to later migrations from other countries.

I mention this because this Sunday is regularly known as "Christ the King" Sunday, among Christian denominations with a strong liturgical sense. Among Anglicans, American Episcopalians were slow to begin using the "Christ the King" designator. As recently as 20 years ago when I was still in seminary, the term "The Last Sunday after Pentecost" was what we were taught. I suspect we were slow to make the change because of long-held memories, and that may be true in many parts of Africa and Asia, where the Anglican Church is rapidly expanding its membership and influence. In many places the words "king" or "supreme ruler" remind us of despots.

It is exactly because of this that I think calling today Christ the King Sunday is important. Even the most benign human monarch is bound to make some serious mistakes in his or her relationship with those under his or her rule. In many places, the ruler is an out-and-out tyrant, judging every subject harshly, worried only about how to get control of the most "things." We have seen several examples of this in the year of the "Arab Spring," even though the leader may be called "president" and not king. While many human leaders, both historically and in modern times, seek to cloak their rule in terms of being divinely sanctioned, they are pale imitations of what God intends and what God's Son models for us as Christ the King.

Ezekiel spoke to the Israelites in exile in Babylon, where some bad choices on the part of their leaders had landed them. God's message by way of Ezekiel's mouth does two things. It describes the way a ruler should care for his or her subjects, using the figure of a shepherd, which would have been familiar to everyone. The ruler-shepherd will provide for the needs of those for whom he has responsibility, providing food, shelter, and safety, and searching out those that get lost in the maze of temptations that lie before each one of us.

At the same time, Ezekiel takes the Israelites to task for their inability to stay in the field in which God attempted to shelter them. Using the image of fat sheep that have eaten all the food intended for their lean sheep companions, God's impending judgment is anticipated. It is not the fat sheep that God favors. God's preference is for the lost, the strayed, the injured, and the weak.

Historically, David had been anointed to lead and feed. God turned a shepherd boy into a shepherd king. We know that David ultimately went the way of other human rulers. His greed and lust for power got him into trouble. Israel continued to suffer cyclical ups and downs, first flourishing and then declining. Inept despots followed God-fearing rulers who really served God's people. Eventually God decided that the salvation of the Chosen People required another monarch, and Jesus was sent into the world as a uniquely human and divine leader. Jesus came to free us from the bondage that our human sinfulness caused, to model appropriate leadership, to help us understand what a good leader is and does.

The entire sweep of the Gospel stories and, indeed, nearly all of Christian scripture, shows us the way Christians are called to behave and to lead. In one way or another, each of us is a leader in our daily life. We are called to be good examples and to lead others into a relationship with God. Baptized into Jesus death and resurrection, as will occur for Michelle in just a few minutes, we are called to work for the things that Jesus worked for. Striving for justice and peace. Caring for those less fortunate than we are, as our Social Ministry committee constantly encourages us, especially those whom governments and corporations oppress and repress. Sharing the good news of God's love for all people, particularly those for whom God has always shown a preference: the lost, the strayed, the injured, and the weak.

Matthew's account of what we usually call the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats makes clear that one thing we are not called to do is to judge others. Ezekiel's message was clear that he understood that God would be the ultimate judge of all people. Christian understanding is that God's Son, who walked among us, served us, and died for us, gets that mission task whenever final judgment occurs. Christian understanding is also clear that there will be a day of judgment, as uncomfortable as that may make modern folks like us feel. Even Jesus didn't know when that will be, but we will all be judged someday.

The basis on which Christians will be judged is clearly evident in the parable. Those who serve Jesus in the same way he served those to whom he ministered will have a place in God's kingdom. By caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, we serve Jesus. It may have been a surprise for those who listened to Jesus' parable to hear him identifying with these outcasts from polite society, especially if they had forgotten the lesson from Ezekiel's story. It may come as a surprise to us, too, or at least make us uncomfortable. But Jesus' intent is hard to refute.

It is important for us to look beyond the specific descriptions of those whom Jesus calls us to serve and remember that there are many ways to be hungry or a stranger or a prisoner. People who haven't been introduced to Jesus are likely to be hungry for salvation or prisoners to unhealthy and false beliefs about God. They may be worshipping false gods that do not bring salvation: gods of power, lust, greed, self-centeredness, insensitivity, intolerance.

People who worship those false gods will find themselves mingling with the goats once Jesus' ministry of judgment is carried out. In the same way, people who know what is expected of Christ's Ones but do not use the gifts God has given us to share for the advancement of God's Kingdom, are also likely candidates for the goat pen. Talking the talk isn't enough; walking the walk is essential. That's what Jesus did, and that's what serving him means.

There is a monarch and leader whom every Christian should be willing to serve. This king deserves our allegiance precisely because of his bloodlines, as opposed to human monarchs who may have "royal blood," and prime ministers and presidents, who do not. This king deserves our loyalty because he is God's son, sent to reign in this world, to serve those whom God prefers, assisted now by God's Holy Spirit. We can serve Christ the King or not, as we choose. We do this, as individuals, as a local church family, and as Christ's Ones, by serving our neighbor as Jesus served so many years ago. Being guided by the Good Shepherd's example will allow us to enjoy eternal life.