



“what we mean when we say Jesus is Lord”

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English

Matthew 25:31-46

‘When the Son of Man comes in his alory, and all the anaels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his alory. All the nations will be qathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his riight hand and the goats at the left. Then the kina will say to those at his riight hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kinadom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hunary and you aave me food, I was thirsty and you aave me somethinga to drink, I was a straaer and you welcomed me, I was naked and you aave me clothina. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the riahteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hunary and aave you food, or thirsty and aave you somethinga to drink? And when was it that we saw you a straaer and welcomed you, or naked and aave you clothina? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the kina will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his anaels; for I was hunary and you aave me no food, I was thirsty and you aave me nothinga to drink, I was a straaer and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not aive me clothina, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hunary or thirsty or a straaer or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the riahteous into eternal life.’

Well everyone, thanksgiving is over so I guess we’re supposed to start saying “Merry Christmas?” Our world seems to have already moved on from Thanksgiving. We’ve made it through the madness of Black Friday, which has become its own kind of holiday, and now, according to our world, we are fully in the Christmas season - which in the church is the season we call Advent. But, it seems as though our culture doesn’t quite know what to do with a season where we talk about things like patience, waiting, and yearning for an already here and yet to be realized manifestation of divine love to be made known anew in our hearts and the world.

It seems like we aren’t really that good at waiting, which was evident in my Facebook feed on Thursday, Thanksgiving night, when multiple people reported that they were in fact already watching their favorite Christmas movies, because, well, Thanksgiving is done and over with right?

And so, here we are as the church in the middle of this strange Christian year, where, because of the calendar, we have a Sunday in between Thanksgiving Sunday and the start of Advent which begins next week. So as the world moves on to Christmas season, for us the season of Advent hasn’t even begun.

But, we have this odd, wondrous, somewhat esoteric, Sunday called Christ the King Sunday, which we celebrate as the end of our church year. So today is like the Christian version of a New Year’s Eve, a time to reflect and to remember who we are and whose we are, to recall and reclaim this simple and yet profound belief that Christ is our King, the King of Kings; that Jesus is the Lord of Lords and that his kingdom will have no end.

If you’ve been around the church or Christianity for a long time then these titles, images and metaphors we attribute to Jesus probably have layers and layers of meaning tied to celebrations throughout the church year or different bible passages you’ve heard.

But, if you are newer to the faith, or perhaps if you’ve never really stopped to think much about it, these titles, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, probably stand out as being a little bit unusual and maybe even a little bit archaic. Perhaps they sound a little bit too churchy or irrelevant in our sphere of the world which, for the most part, is kingless and lordless.

But truth be told these phrases are rich and full of meaning which I believe is still remarkably relevant to the way in which we live today as people of faith.

So let’s unpack this idea through the lens of the text that we just heard read for us which comes from the gospel according to Matthew. This passage comes from the end of Matthew’s gospel, as Jesus is preparing for his final days and his journey toward the cross. Jesus is teaching his closest followers and friends, his disciples as he gives him this image of what we sometimes call the final judgement. Jesus talks about the son of Man being seated on the throne and all the people of every tribe and nation being separated out as either goats or sheep. To the sheep Jesus says come into the joy of an abundant life: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me some clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

The sheep reply, “Lord, when did we do all of this for you, we don’t remember doing any of this?” To which Jesus replied, “truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

And then Jesus says the son of man says to the goats, “you are cast off, because you withheld your food and drink, you offered me no welcome when I was a stranger, you did not care for me when I was sick, you didn’t give me clothes when I was naked and you never visited me in prison.”

The goats reply, “Lord when did we not do any of this?” To which Jesus replies, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did not do it to me.”

So what Jesus is doing here is somewhat lost on us as modern readers, but he is totally flipping everything upside down. Every societal norm, how his society was structured, all of the notions of power and authority, **everything everyone thought they knew about the way the world is supposed to work, Jesus is challenging.** He is challenging all of these ideas and conventions, he’s reshaping and reforming it all into this vision of what he calls the kingdom of God.

See the backdrop of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, his entire ministry is the Roman Empire, which was the biggest baddest empire that the world had ever known. The Roman Empire was built around this central notion that the way to true power was through coercive violence, oppression and absolute control. The Romans would march into your home, your village, with the largest and strongest military you’d ever seen, and they would say: declare your allegiance to Caesar, proclaim Caesar is the Son of God, Caesar is Lord or die.

So this word, Lord, this title, was reserved for the most powerful, most wealthy, most untouchable human being that had or would ever live, Caesar, the ruler of the world, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

So here we have Jesus, this man, this carpenter, this guy from Galilee, a rural, backwater kind of place, who calls fishermen and tax collectors to follow him, Jesus, who's teaching, engaging and empowering slaves and Samaritans and women. This man Jesus who's healing the sick and touching the untouchable and he's having dinner parties with all the wrong people, all the known sinners in the village. This man who's challenging the structures of power in this world by making these radical claims like the way to true power isn't through coercive violence and oppression but humble, life-giving love for all people.

Jesus who is inviting people into a different kind of life, living into a different kind of kingdom, the kingdom of God, a kingdom ruled by grace and mercy, where the meek inherit the earth, where the poor and the poor in spirit are blessed with divine favor, where lowly are exalted, and those who have been last, time and time again are finally first and those who have been first since birth are last.

Jesus is proclaiming the good news of God's unbounded love and overflowing joy for all people, all people, especially for those who know what it's like to have the boot of the empire on their neck, those who have been used up and spit out by the powers of this world for their own gain and their own profit. Jesus says no you have inherent sacred worth, you are created in the image of God, follow in my way because Jesus, not Caesar, is the way to an abundant life; Jesus, not Caesar, will offer us salvation, wholeness and a peace that is beyond all understanding.

Jesus, not Caesar, is king of kings and lord of lords.

See what he's doing here? This loaded and powerful word, this politically charged and dangerous title, Jesus is taking it all and flipping it upside down. And the most radical thing he does in this passage is he says whenever you serve those who are the most forgotten, whenever you reach out to those who are the most ignored, anytime you are driven by compassion for the one who is in need, you are in fact serving your Lord, you are serving Jesus himself.

This is the very nature of the love of God revealed to us in scripture time and time again, a God whose power is revealed in powerlessness, a God who creates each of us, no matter who we are or where we find ourselves in God's sacred image, a God whose compassion and mercy are without limit or condition, and a God who calls and empowers us to live lives where we give ourselves away for others in love.

Ok, so I wanted to talk a little bit about the whole final judgment aspect of this passage. For some of us this may not be that big of a deal, but for others it may seem a little bit off putting or perhaps a little bit too hell fire and brimstone.

But I think the thing that may be lost on us is the fact that Jesus is really teaching with this sense of urgency to his followers. And, I don't think he is talking about the final judgment or what happens at the end of time, as much as he is teaching about what we experience in the here and now, what we experience in the day to day of our life, the good and the bad, the love we share and the love we withhold, the heaven and hell we experience in this life.

And if I'm being completely honest here, I think that we probably are all a little bit of the sheep and a little bit of the goat. I don't think we are fully one or the other. Life just isn't that neat and clean. But we have these moments where we share freely, where we seek opportunities to serve or reach out in love and other moments when we withhold, withdraw or retreat into our selfish ways.

But here's the kicker, through the power of God's sanctifying grace, following Jesus, practicing our spirituality, we can grow more and more aware of all those times we are the goats, all those times we hoard our love, and we can grow more loving, more compassionate, more whole, slowly over time.

Maybe it's like this experience you might have had: when you wake up and you're just in a mood and you're caught up in your own head, focused on all your own problems, bound in self-centered thinking, and you bring that to your day and your interactions with others and your bitterness rubs off of those around you, and because of this, your interactions leave you feeling more irritable, angry and dissatisfied, and the day that started off pretty bad just kind of avalanches into this pretty terrible and rotten place. The more wound up you get inside yourself the more you just can't see the larger whole and you missed out on all the opportunities you had throughout the day to get out of your own way and to share a little bit of yourself with others, you missed the chance to connect, to be liberated from the prison of the self-turned in.

But then, by the grace of God, there are those other moments, the moments when we get it right, the moments when we experience the blessing and wholeness, and this kingdom of God that the sheep inherit available to us today, in the very moment when we are able to respond with a love that is greater than our own, when we are able to channel the grace and goodness of God by loving and accepting and serving a person in need, receiving them just as they are, without expectation and without condition.

Maybe it's that unexpected urge within you to spark up a conversation with someone who just looks like they are having the worst day ever and for whatever reason they open up to you and bear a little bit of their struggle and of their beautiful soul, or maybe it's finally buying two lunches at the farmers market, one for you and one for the homeless woman you see each week with her sign and her can instead of letting her just fade into the background of the market like you sometimes do.

Or maybe it's the hug you gave and the tear you shed with the person who just lost their partner and their life seems to be caving in on itself and everything within you is saying just hold the space, just hold the space, somehow God will make it enough. See whenever you reached out in love, whenever you are present and attentive to someone in their need, whenever you got out of yourself long enough to lighten someone else's load, if only for a little bit.

No act of love is ever wasted, every single act of compassion, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant is a sacred offering to the one we call the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the one who calls us to give ourselves away in humble life-giving love, following him above everything and everyone else. Thanks be to God. Amen.