

Christ the King of the Preaching Laboratory

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Grace Lutheran Church Boulder, Colorado

Based on Matthew 25.31-46

Christ the King is a festival of the church. We'd usually have white paraments and vestments. We'd light the paschal candle. It is less well known than other festivals; Christmas or Easter or Pentecost or even Epiphany or All Saints. Most folks don't know a lot about it, but there was an event in the fall of 2007 that year after year brings Christ the King Sunday into focus for me.

Learning to preach is a process that can be taught in a classroom. There are plenty of homiletic theories and theologies, but actually becoming a decent preacher takes practice. And while in seminary there was a lecture for preaching class, there was also a lab section.

It was mostly terrifying.¹

In the lab you'd preach from a pulpit installed in a classroom to a small group of your peers and the professor. When you finished the group clapped², then you'd talk about it as a group before the professor weighed in.

I want to be clear that sermon I am about to reference was not a sermon I preached. No, one week my friend, Matt, was given the texts for Christ the King Sunday as a preaching lab assignment.

Matt preached. We listened, then we clapped, but before we could do much group discussion the professor jumped in.

To tell you the truth I don't actually remember anything Matt said, but I do remember vividly our professor's response. Matt must have spent some time in his sermon criticizing this festival for portraying a Jesus as a king, for suggesting that Jesus might rule our lives and the world like a masculine, autocratic ruler, that a feudalistic image of God was out of touch with the modern world. He must have said something like that, because the professor's response was pointed and forceful.

¹ Though it is one of the only times in a preacher's career when they get constructive and informed feedback from a preaching professor.

² Clapping was mandatory.

The professor rebuked Matt's sermon and chastised him for not knowing his history, for not fully appreciating the historical context in which this festival of the church arose. For the record Matt claims that he did the research and knew the background and that this criticism was unfair. While I avoided getting chewed out, I did not know the history.

And so, in the event that at some point in your life you find yourself in a preaching lab, I am going to tell you a little bit about the history of Christ the King Sunday so that you will avoid the fate of my friend, Matt. (Who, for the record, is a terrific preacher.)

Christ the King Sunday is the newest of all the major church festivals. It's newer by a lot. It was established less than a hundred years ago in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. It ended up in our Lutheran calendars through the reforms of Vatican II and the ecumenism of the protestant liturgical renewal of the 60's and 70's.

It was established by Pope Pius as a response to rising nationalism in Europe. Mussolini had come to power in Italy via a coup in 1922. Inspired by those events there was a coup in Spain in 1923 that would eventually pave the way for Franco. In 1923 there was a failed Nazi coup in Bavaria.

Pius intended this new festival as a forceful response. A reminder that our identity as Christians is our highest calling and that Christianity is a force that unites humanity across national borders and the borders of ideology. It was intended to say just as boldly that while Jesus is the king these emerging nationalistic leaders are not.

It is this context that has given me a deep respect for this festival and for its active engagement in the world.

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Upon first reading this morning's gospel seems as scary as I remember Dr. Satterlee being back in my preaching class.

Jesus says that when the Son of Man comes the nations will be gathered and people will be separated like sheep and goats. Things will be pretty good for those who feed the hungry, who care for the seek, visit the imprisoned, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty. Now, here is the scary part. For those who do not do those thing, things will not be so good. They are condemned to eternal punishment. While the others get eternal life.

So, upon my first reading, I am scared. I don't want to screw things up like Matt did with that sermon. And so, I must constantly be on the look out for the incognito king...or else!

You've probably heard me say this before, but the thing that makes Lutherans Lutheran is that we are proclaimers of the good news. And after hearing this story, I must confess that there seems to be very little in the way of good news here.

That is, unless you've ever been hungry or thirsty, sick or a stranger. Or too poor to buy a new coat. I suppose if you've ever experienced one of those things then this gospel is pretty good news. From that place this is a story about how committed God is to your wellness, to your wholeness, to your very literal salvation. From that place this is a story about seriously God takes your hunger and the lengths God will go to in order that you might be fed.

If count ourselves among the sheep and the goats, we hear a gospel veiled in threats. We hear reward and we hear an awful lot of punishment. But if we hear this story from the perspective of a king, from the perspective of the king who dwells among the hungry and the poor, then we proclaim unequivocal good news. It seems that Paul might have been right all along, *The power of the cross is foolishness, but for those being saved it is the power of God.*

As we celebrate the ultimate Sunday of the liturgical calendar this is where we have landed. In a place of tension. Pulled on one side by the good news. On the other by our desire to count ourselves as among the sheep. We're pulled on one side by God's promise of fullness and health and on the other by the reality of a world in a pandemic.

The liturgi-nerd in me would like to tell you that after Pius XI proclaimed a liturgical holiday, the political leaders of Europe took a moment to reflect on the path they were on and changed their course. But you know, that in 1925 nationalism and autocracy were not stopped in their tracks by the liturgy.

A part of a promise that is in such tension with the reality of the world is the promise that this tension will not hold. The vision of life that God holds for us is so far away from the world we are living in that they cannot co-exist for long. Though for now we must wait, the tension will tear a hole. Something new will be birthed. This new thing, I promise you will be good... for the sick and the hungry, the poor and the imprisoned. Whoever those people might be. **Amen.**