

To Inherit the Kingdom
Sunday, November 22, 2020, The Feast of Christ the King
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Rev. Patrick C. Ward
Matthew 25:31-46

“Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

In the name of God. AMEN

Good morning Trinity Church!

Believe it or not, this morning marks the last Sunday of the church year. The last Sunday before we begin Advent together.

And it is the custom of the Church on this final Sunday to mark the feast of Christ the King. To consider what that kingship might mean for us. It’s a Sunday that – above all else – asks us to consider life together in the broadest possible sense. That our faith calls us into public consideration and actions, a way of being and living beyond our personal lives.

The Feast of Christ the King, compared to our other feasts and fasts, is a relatively new day on the church calendar. You won’t find mention of it in our *Book of Common Prayer*, which officially recognizes today only as Proper 29, the last Sunday of the church year.ⁱ Perhaps you’ll be surprised to learn that the Feast of Christ the King, celebrated in the Episcopal church by custom as well as by Lutherans and other mainline churches is officially only 95 years old. It was instituted for Roman Catholics in 1925 by an Encyclical of Pope Pius XIⁱⁱ, and during the last century, in the spirit of ecumenism, it moved out beyond the Roman fold.

1925 was the Jazz Age. The Roaring Twenties. But despite prosperity in America and other parts of the world, 1925 a terrifying and uncertain time. The First World War and a global influenza pandemic were fresh memories.

Fascists had been in power for two years in Italy. Totalitarian communism was newly established in the Soviet Union. Hitler published *Mein Kampf* in that year, and in Washington 40,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in hoods and robes. In his encyclical Pius laments deeply a world (and I quote) of “bitter enmities and rivalries between nations,” where “insatiable greed ... is so often hidden under a pretense of public spirit and patriotism,” where “blind and immoderate selfishness, make men seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage.” “We firmly hope,” concludes Pius, “that the feast of the Kingship of Christ, which in future will be yearly observed, may hasten the return of society to our loving Savior.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The return to society of our loving Savior. Before he died in February, 1939, Pius would begin work on an encyclical condemning Nazi racism as contrary to the Christian faith. The draft *Humani Generis Unitas* cited the common humanity of all people as created in the image of God.^{iv} Interestingly for us as Trinity parishioners, one of the encyclical’s three authors was an American Jesuit, John La Farge, the namesake son of the artist whose murals and stained glass adorn the worship space we miss so much right now.

The Nazi regime condemned Pius XI and all of this work pointedly. “We deny the Pope’s statement that there is one human race,” said Robert Ley, Nazi Minister of Labor in 1939.^v Pius XI’s draft was abandoned by his successor, Pius XII, whose approach to fascist leaders in his own country was more conciliatory. Nonetheless, the conviction that there is one human race endures as a foundation of orthodox, mainline Christian political ethics. It’s threaded through our collect this morning: “grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslave by sin, may be brought together under Christ’s most gracious rule.”

“Gracious rule” or a rule of grace, is one that extends love to the other as a matter of course. The love flows to the deserving and the undeserving.

To those who profess the faith and those who do not. And what this looks like in practice is shown to us vividly in Matthew's gospel this morning: I was hungry and you fed me, says the king. I was naked and you clothed me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.^{vi}

We have heard those words so many times that we miss perhaps the radical component of this kingdom love. It has nothing to do with the merits or the virtues of the hungry, naked stranger. There are no qualifying questions asked before the hand is extended. It has nothing to do with that person's professed faith. It has nothing to do with their good behavior. We do not care for the hungry naked stranger because they happen to be good or talented or potentially useful members of society. We care for others because they are human. Because they are God's own, made by God as we are for one purpose: for the love of God. ***God made us for the love of God.*** Here is how the great radical reformer Dorothy Day understood it: "The gospel," she said "takes away forever our right to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor."^{vii}

"I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep,"^{viii} says the Lord God as revealed to us this morning by the Prophet Ezekiel. It is not for you to sort. To push with flank and shoulder, to butt at the weak with your horns.^{ix}

I wonder how these words and images are landing with you this morning. This vision of kingdom life. Judging, sorting, pushing and butting away have become in these months of pandemic and polarization something like a national pastime. I do my own daily share as I listen to the news and scroll through my feeds. Our red state and blue state divisions are front and center. I'll confess to you this morning, aware that you may think differently, that our President's rejection of our national election results have me personally anxious, afraid and brimming with judgment. At the same moment, I am distressed by another set of impulses and energies contorting our national life.

In his book – *The Tyranny of Merit; what’s become of the common good?* – Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel argues that conventional and centrist American ideas about success and failure are encouraging us to classify and dehumanize our fellow citizens. Our social bonds and respect for each other, Sandel submits, have unraveled over the past four decades. While it’s not surprising to me personally that Sandel would level that charge at the right, his assessment of “left of center” and far left are credible as well. “I won the places that represent two-thirds of America’s domestic product,” said Hillary Clinton at a conference in Mumbai, India in 2018. “So I won the places that are optimistic, dynamic, diverse, moving forward.”^x

Sandel lives in one of those places as a Harvard professor. So do many of us. And what concerns Sandel the most in Clinton’s critical analysis of her own defeat is something he understands as the troubling moral companion of contemporary American politics, now both Republican and Democrat: “The notion,” he writes, “the notion that the system rewards talent and hard work encourages the winner to consider their success their own doing, a measure of their virtue – and to look down upon those less fortunate than themselves.”^{xi}

In Sandel’s analysis, luck and good fortune and family wealth are too often disregarded as the boosters they are. The idea of meritocracy is corrosive to our common life because not everyone has an equal chance to rise as far as talent and hard work will take them. The trouble with the idea of “deserving” any of our personal good fortune is that it can give rise in our hearts and minds to a harsh ethic of success.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” says the King. The stranger may deserve the welcome or not. But the question itself is never raised.

“I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep,” says the Lord God as revealed to us this morning by the Prophet Ezekiel. You must cease to push with flank and shoulder.

“The gospel,” says Dorothy Day, “takes away forever our right to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.”

They are each in their way showing us snapshots from the Kingdom. Inherit this Kingdom, says Jesus. Unspoken, perhaps, is the deeper challenge: What must we leave behind before we can enter in?

ⁱ *The Book of Common Prayer* p. 236

ⁱⁱ For the complete text of the papal encyclical of the December 11, 1925, see http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Section 24

^{iv} For excerpts from the draft encyclical see [DRAFT ENCYCLICAL: "Humani Generis Unitas" \(1938\) \(ccjr.us\)](#). While the draft advocates for an end to *racial* discrimination against the Jewish people and for the essential unity of the human race, it lamentably upholds the centuries-old custom of praying for their conversion to Christianity. The Roman Church, with the publication of *Nostra Aetate* (1965) moved away from such prayers. For more, if you are interested, see [The Conversion of the Jews? | Catholic Culture](#).

^v “The Jews or Us” by Robert Ley may be found at <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/ley3.htm>

^{vi} Matthew 25:31-46

^{vii} For more about Day, see [Meet Dorothy Day — Dorothy Day House \(dorothydaymemphis.org\)](#)

^{viii} Ezekiel 34:20

^{ix} Ezekiel 34:21

^x Sandel, Michael, *The Tyranny of Merit: what's become of the common good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020) p. 27

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 41