



Roanoke, Virginia  
November 26, 2023

## *“Sheep and Goats”*

*Matthew 25:13-45*

**Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link**

Today is known as Christ the King Sunday, or the Reign of Christ Sunday. Many people don't love that term, “Christ the King”—we're not too good with kings in this part of the world. But this Sunday's origins date back to post—WWI Europe, when the Roman Catholic Church first instituted this feast day. Christ the King Sunday was an answer back to rising nationalism in Europe. It was a way for the church to take a stand against nationalism. We raise similar questions when we ask how Jesus fits into our understanding of who is in control? Who gets our ultimate allegiance? And what does it mean to be both a citizen of a state or country and a Christian—a citizen of Christ's kingdom?

May we ponder these questions as we approach our text.

Matthew 25:31-46. <sup>31</sup> ‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>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, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” <sup>40</sup>And the king 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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 angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” <sup>45</sup>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.”

About ten years ago, in 2013, Canadian sculptor and devout Catholic Timothy Schmalz installed his new bronze sculpture at Regis College, University of Toronto. The piece, entitled *Jesus the Homeless*, depicts the risen Jesus as a vagrant sleeping on a park bench, huddled beneath a blanket, his hands and face obscured. Only the crucifixion wounds on his feet give away his identity. Since the sculpture’s installation, it’s been reproduced and installed on the grounds of many churches and Christian campuses around the world.

Regardless of where the sculpture appears, reactions are immediate. People either love it, or they hate it.

At St. Alban’s Episcopal Church in Davidson, NC, where a reproduction was installed in 2014, the rector shares in an interview with NPR that “one woman from the neighborhood actually called police the first time she drove by. She thought it was an actual homeless person.”<sup>i</sup> The woman literally called the cops on Jesus.

Another neighbor near the church wrote a letter to the editor in the local paper, saying that the statue creeps him out. The rector goes on, describing how some neighbors feel the sculpture is an insulting depiction of the son of God, and that what appears to be a hobo curled up on a bench demeans the neighborhood.

The artist, Schmalz, intended the sculpture as a visual translation of our passage in Matthew. “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” (v40). He understands that his *Jesus the Homeless* is provocative. “It’s meant to challenge people,” he says.

Schmalz offered the first casts of the sculpture to St. Michael’s Cathedral in Toronto and St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York, but both cathedrals declined. That’s how it’s first cast landed it in front of Regis College, the Jesuit School of Theology, at the University of Toronto.

One thing is for sure, it never ceases to make a stir, wherever *Jesus the Homeless* finds a home.



Today is Christ the King Sunday. As Debie Thomas writes, we might assume a scripture reading that sounds more *kingly*. But no. The royalty Jesus describes in Matthew's Gospel is of another order altogether. It is homeless Jesus. Sick Jesus. Imprisoned Jesus. Hungry Jesus. Naked Jesus. It is, in the words of Episcopal theologian Fleming Rutledge, the "royalty that stoops."<sup>iii</sup>

Matthew is a Gospel of surprises. Perhaps we should be used to it by now. After all, God didn't come to reign over all humankind in Athens or Rome. God came to identify *with* humankind by being born in a no-name village to an unwed mother. God didn't come to conquer with military or political might, but in the scandal and pain of the cross.

Matthew 25 is one of Jesus' last public statements prior to the Last Supper. In fact, what immediately follows in Matthew 26 is Jesus' prediction of his own death, his anointing at Bethany, his prayer in dark Gethsemane, and his arrest. So, what he is saying here, in one of his last messages to us, must be important. So important, in fact, that he says it one way or another four times in our verses.

Over the centuries, this passage has been described as the "Judgement of the Pagans" or the "Last Judgement." Jesus is seen separating sheep and goats, rewarding them or condemning them according to their actions, or lack thereof.

I must admit, I tend to avoid biblical passages that seem to be about judgment. I was raised in the Bible Belt, and language about sin and impending judgment had me afraid in my earlier years that the devil was around almost any corner, waiting for just the right moment to come and find me. I had friends that never felt assured of their own salvation and told me they prayed for my own. It was a relief to me as a young person to be a part of a church like ours that doesn't focus on the "end times," but rather the here and now times.

In fact, when we pay attention to what Matthew is saying, the question here is not, "Am I going to heaven?" or "Will I be saved?" or "Am I a sheep or a goat?" If we were asking these questions, Matthew would say we have missed the point. I think that the question rightly asked here is not *what* happens at the end of things, but more like *how are we supposed to be living right now?* How does Jesus call us to live? What would our lives be like—how would our lives be different if we lived as though Christ were King?

The Roman Empire may be long gone, but the conflict over who is lord in our lives is still acted out daily. We live in a world, in a nation, where people align themselves with leaders and follow blindly along both sides of the aisle. The world still wants us to worship all that is Not-God,



and rewards us when we do. But the conflict between this earthly kingdom and the divine realm becomes clearly delineated in the life of Jesus. Jesus tells us and shows us that the usual things the world elevates as gods—things like power, wealth, and fame—are false values. The values of the kingdom of God, however—love, service, and compassion—those values are supreme.

Life in God’s kingdom is not about what you have or who you are, but it’s about what you do. In this way, our actions *do* have eternal significance. It matters what we do. It matters whether we choose to live a life of love or a life of selfishness. It matters how we treat others. It matters to us. It matters to God. It matters to God’s kingdom.

You know, it’s amazing how often, when we try to show the love of Jesus to others, we end up finding Jesus in the lives of those we serve.

Last month, we had a Minute for Mission from the director of Roanoke Area Ministries, Melissa Woodson. As she stood at our lectern and told us about RAM House and their important ministries with our neighbors in need, she shared about how she learns so much from the people she serves. What I heard her saying through those words was that she saw the face of Jesus in places and faces where we might least expect it.

Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners magazine, writes that Matthew 25 is what brought him to Christ. He had moved into one of the poorest parts of Washington, DC, in the neighborhood where a woman named Mary Glover lived. After a while, and in response to a growing need, Wallis says he joined with neighbors to start a simple food line on Saturday mornings, where many people lined up just 20 blocks from the White House to get a big bag of groceries that would get their families through the week. Volunteers, who actually needed their own bags of groceries, came to put them together each week before the line opened. Once everything was ready, the group prayed. And Mary Glover prayed—she prayed like someone who knew whom she was talking to. She prayed, “Lord, we know that you will be coming through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well—help us to treat you well. Amen.”<sup>iii</sup>

Mary Glover was able to see Jesus and to point to him in the hungry people coming through the food line.

So many of us, one way or another, long to “see Jesus.” We study his word, we pray, sing hymns, recite creeds, and listen to sermons—all in an attempt to see and know Jesus in a deeper and more meaningful way.



There is nothing wrong with these practices. I find them so important that I devote a large part of my life to them. But we miss the mark if we believe these practices are somehow enough without the work of justice and compassion Jesus calls for in Matthew 25. The real business of Christianity is seeing and serving Jesus in the least, the lost, and the broken.

It's not that we earn our way to King Jesus by caring for the vulnerable. It is that King Jesus *is* the vulnerable. As Advent grows closer, we are reminded that our true king is not loud, aggressive, and power-hungry. Our king came into the world small and vulnerable. Our king's great displays of power included riding on a donkey, washing dirty feet, and hanging on a cross.

Soon, we will enter into a season of waiting. Soon, we will venture into the darkness, longing for the light to dawn, listening for the first cries of a vulnerable baby to redefine kingship forever. But today, we are asked to see Jesus where we'd rather not look. We are asked to look for this accessible king in-fleshed in the suffering, in the hungry, in the imprisoned, in the forgotten of our world. This king is accessible to anybody through acts of mercy and love. This king calls us to live in his kingdom now and join him in this kind of living.

To live in that kingdom now, we are called to see those the world would have us ignore; we are called to host a meal in Alexa House this new year, to swing a hammer at our Habitat Build, to volunteer at the Presbyterian Community Center, the Rescue Mission, or with Meals on Wheels. To live in that kingdom now, we are called to speak out against injustice and to show compassion toward those whom society rejects. To live as though Christ were king, we make love our rule. Love is what we are called to choose. Compassion is the way we are called to live.

*Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" <sup>40</sup> And the king 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."*

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<sup>i</sup> John Burnett, "Statue of a Homeless Jesus Startles a Wealthy Community," NPR, aired April 13, 2014.

<https://www.npr.org/2014/04/13/302019921/statue-of-a-homeless-jesus-startles-a-wealthy-community>

<sup>ii</sup> Debie Thomas, "You Did It To Me," *Journey with Jesus*, posted November 15, 2020.

<sup>iii</sup> Jim Wallis, "Lord, Help Us to Treat You Well," in *Sojourners*, March 2, 2017. <https://sojo.net/articles/lord-help-us-treat-you-well>

