



Lynnae Douglas' Sermon

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING

NOVEMBER 22, 2020

MATTHEW 25:31–46

Today we mark two endings as a church family. The first is that today we come to the end of our congregation's stewardship campaign. We express our gratitude to God for all that he has done in and through Calvary this past year, and we pledge our commitments for another year. We ask God to make us thankful people, and take our offerings and multiply them for his good and wise purposes. We do this action together as one more way to remind ourselves that we do not belong to ourselves, but to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We also celebrate the Feast of Christ the King which marks the end of another church year. We commemorate with churches around the world this festival day as we look to our Lord Jesus Christ, the enthroned King, dwelling in unimaginable glory with all the angels surrounding him. This is the majestic King and Judge of all the universe, before whom knees bend and hearts tremble. Matthew tells of the coming day when Christ's royalty, which was always veiled from human eyes, will be fully revealed.

Royalty is a fascinating idea, perhaps especially to those of us who live in a democratic republic. A recent show called *The Crown* has capitalized on this. *The Crown* follows the reign of Queen Elizabeth II and its makers must have been thoroughly convinced that they would captivate a large audience since they spent \$130 million on the first season alone! I suppose if you want to make a show about royalty, you'll need to budget accordingly.

Caleb and I are among those viewers and I can attest to the fact that the extravagant costumes, the excellent acting, the cinematography and the beauty of the locations in which the show is filmed certainly do keep our attention. But it's the combination of those things with a recurring theme that keeps me watching. The show highlights the necessary sacrifice that comes with being royalty, and the complex tensions and conflicts that arise when members of the royal family refuse to sacrifice. There are choices constantly being presented between duty and desire, between making sacrifices for the good of "the Crown" and placing personal interests before one's royal identity. Denying oneself for the sake of being a member of a royal family does not come easily. There's a cost to it, even if wearing a dazzling crown and living in Buckingham Palace seems to be a pretty nice trade-off.

Though the writers and producers of the show don't know it, this compelling combination of royalty and sacrifice tells a far greater and more powerful story than the they have imagined. All of the pomp and ornamental features of a \$130 million first season cannot begin to compare to the royalty, the extravagant splendor and radiance of King Jesus seated upon his throne at the right hand of God the Father. He is co-equal in majesty with the Maker of *all* that exists. What exactly is \$130 million dollars to the One through whom the stars were hung in the sky and by whom planets find their orbit?

Moses came before divine royalty, so to speak, when he asked to see God's glory. God told him that he wouldn't be able to see the face of God and live. His eyes could not take in the radiance of God's glory. This is the same glory that Jesus Christ ascended to when he was raised from the dead. Where do we find another king who conquered *every* enemy of *all* mankind by being raised from the dead, who *still lives* in glory? We can't. All that is left of monarchs from the past is maybe an ornate burial site and their remains—they're all still in their graves. King Jesus was not vanquished; sin and death and the devil were. The power and majesty and authority of Jesus Christ cannot be matched by any royalty on this earth.

And if his royalty is far greater and more powerful than any earthly example of it, the same can be said of his sacrifice. Where can we find a king like Jesus, who humbled himself and stooped so low, that he left the glorious realms of heaven to live on this earth? I remember this reality becoming vivid to me when I spent a summer teaching English in Varanasi India. Varanasi is a very old city and it's certainly not Westernized. Some of the missionaries I worked with would joke about the fact that in Varanasi, you feel like you're living in a zoo, except the humans are in the minority and the animals don't have any cages. That was only a slight exaggeration. I remember one particular day I was walking down a small alley heading toward the Ganges River—a river which was actually dying for lack of oxygen. All I could see and smell around me was filth. It looked like there was a stream of urine running down the alley, the ground I was walking on to avoid the stream was covered with animal poop, there was tons of garbage around to add to the smells, and the 115 degree humid air was stifling. And I remember the thought hit me, the Son of God left heaven for this. God's love for us is so vast, that he would send his Son to this very earth, to these very people. And while Brookfield WI looks and smells much more pleasant to us than the scene I'm describing, when compared with heaven, it's every bit as filthy and smelly. But Jesus of lowly Nazareth did not look and only see and smell filth. He saw his Father's precious world that needed saving. Never has there been another King who dwells in inexpressible light, yet who comes to bring his royal kingdom to the likes of us.

The lengths and depths of Christ's sacrifice for us are never more clear than when we look to the cross. Duty and desire are here perfectly inseparable. He counted the cost and endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Hebrews 12:2). Just before Matthew records Jesus' journey to Calvary, he records Jesus teaching his disciples one last time, in these rather sobering parables we've been hearing the last couple of weeks. Now Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man will one day come in glory and all the angels will be with him. He says that he will separate people from all nations, one from another, by placing some on his right and some on his left.

Then this King and Judge will say to those on the right, "Come. Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world." These are the ones who share in the King's royal inheritance by sharing in his sacrificial living. They were the ones who welcomed the stranger, gave food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. And strangely enough, they didn't even know they were serving the hidden King by serving those who were in need.

Those on the left hear a different word from the King. They hear the terrifying word "depart." "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." These are the people who did not give of themselves to care for those in need, and so they missed the opportunity to serve the King by serving those with whom the King identifies himself. They do not receive the royal inheritance but eternal punishment.

Now we don't want to get off into thinking that this section from Matthew is just another rendition of "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town." It's not that "he's making a list and checking it twice, cuz he's gonna find out whose naughty or nice." This is not the point. The point is not to be good and tally up your acts of mercy so you can be let into the kingdom. Remember, the question that came from those on the right was, "when did we ever do any of these things for you Lord?" They didn't even realize what they were doing, so we'd be missing the message if we leave here trying to figure out exactly who the least are among us and then make a list of good works we can do to merit our royal inheritance. Equally surprised are those on the left who *presume* that they did minister to Christ, they did merit his reward. "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked...and not help you?" they asked.

Fleming Rutledge, a preacher who I greatly admire, puts it this way: "The coming of Jesus Christ as judge of the world calls every single person's existence into question. There is no human merit anywhere to bail us out. We cannot rely on any *known* good deeds; the complete astonishment of the redeemed and the shattered confidence of the condemned are clear evidence of this."

The point of Christ's teaching here is not that we'll one day meet our Maker and he'll be Judge over a cosmic talent contest as Pastor Ken said last week. Our King and Judge is Jesus. He saw you and me as needy sinners. He saw

us as the strangers, the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned people that we are. He is the King unlike every other, who, instead of punishing us as our sins deserve, looks at us with compassion and mercy. He stoops and humbles himself unto death so that we can be filled with his unending love. "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger," Jesus says in John 6, "whoever believes in me shall not thirst...whoever comes to me I will never cast out." It is not acts of mercy that merit for us a royal inheritance, but being united to the King who does the one great act of mercy and love on the cross for us.

Christ the King combines glorious royalty and humble sacrifice in himself, and those who are included in his life are given a share in this same combination. In baptism we are given a living, active, daily faith. We are given Christ's own pair of eyes that allow us to see with compassion our brother or sister in need. And when we serve those who are least among us, we serve our Lord and King himself. 1 John 3:17-18 says, "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

We probably will not know exactly who Christ identifies as "the least of these [his] brothers and sisters." The Bible often talks about the least and the greatest, the last and the first, in ways that are counterintuitive to us. But the Spirit of God lives in us, opening our eyes to see the needs around us. Sometimes the people closest to us are the hardest to serve in this way. It's hard to see the needs of close family members or friends because they are the ones who tend to hurt us the most, and we hurt them. Or maybe a fellow member of Calvary or a neighbor might be sick or hungry, whether that sickness or hunger is physical or spiritual. And you will be called upon to see the face of Jesus Christ on the needy people God places before you, whoever they may be. He'll give you the grace to do it, not for a reward or to be applauded. You'll do it because you've been claimed as one of Christ's own and he places his sacrificial love within your heart.

So what does any of this have to do with our financial pledges? Well as we crown Jesus the King of our lives, his sacrificial love touches down in every area of our lives. Though I couldn't find the exact reference, it's been said that Luther once remarked that there are three conversions Christians go through, and they take some time. The conversion of the head, the conversion of the heart and the conversion of the pocketbook. He says that the last one is often the hardest and longest conversion of all. But Christ can be King even in how we relate to our money. We come to recognize that what we give in his name and for his sake is his to begin with. And he helps us use our money with wisdom, knowing that it won't last forever though our eternal inheritance will. As you place your pledge cards in the basket this year, and I know some of you have already done this, I want to encourage you not to give from a place of guilt or coercion, but as an act of praise to your King, an act of thanks to the Giver of all gifts. And as we receive our Lord's sacrificed body and poured out blood, may our eyes be opened and our hearts softened to the needs around us. Let us praise our King for living in us by his Spirit, and for patiently molding us into people who will one day hear his gracious words: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, receive your inheritance which has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world." To this eternal King be all glory and power and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.