

Today is an interesting paradox. The last Sunday of Pentecost otherwise known as the last Sunday of “ordinary time”. And, Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent- the first Sunday of a new liturgical year.

What have we learned through this time since Pentecost in June? Things have grown and bloomed. Things have been harvested. Things have died or at least are settling in for winter. It’s a perfect time for a bit of reflection about our life as Christians.

If this is Christ the King Sunday, what do we make of the Gospel readings? Sheep – and goats. Right hand and left hand. Blessings and those who will go away into eternal punishment. (And, I have to protest as a leftie and on behalf of all left-handed people!)

If Christ is king in the sense that we might think about monarchies during Biblical times, why is the focus on choices? Unlike monarchs of today, monarchs then could order something done and you did it under pain of death. Feed my sheep – and if the sheep went hungry, you were likely to be thrown into prison and go hungry. The king ordered and you did whatever was ordered.

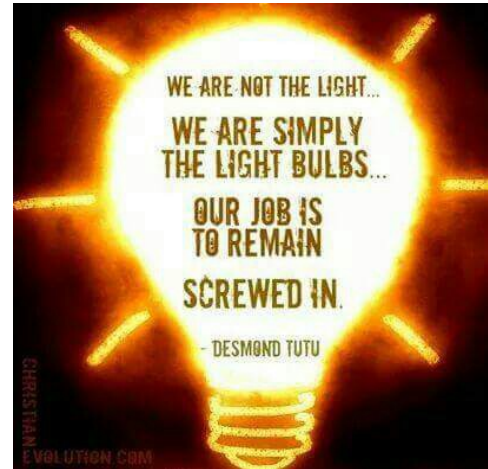
Welcome the stranger- provide hospitality. Woe to you if the king found a stranger left on the doorstep. You were likely to be cast out if you failed to provide sustenance for the stranger.

And the list goes on with what Jesus commands us to do. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote about his quandary over what God was calling him to do – not just what God had called him to be. His response was that he must integrate into himself the Gospel message- in his heart as well as his head. Intellectual knowledge and response is insufficient. Heart must lead with hands and feet to follow. Head, heart, hands and feet- they must all be integrated in order to live an authentic life faithful to the Gospel message.

And, Luther – as we’ve heard in the Great Courses series that we’ve been watching this fall, reminds us that our faith comes first; our faith comes through God’s grace. But it doesn’t stop there. Our faith must be lived in the world. And that is what prompts us to act.

The ministry of Jesus – of Christ the King- wasn’t only about sitting around a table and talking. It wasn’t only about teaching, although teaching was very much part of who Jesus was and how he related to people.

Remember Mary and Martha: the one sister sitting at the feet of Jesus absorbing his teaching while the other worked to make sure all the guests were taken care of. Jesus’s whole ministry was full of action. He got out among the people and found out what their needs were. Sometimes he filled those needs – and sometimes he asked questions: “Do you want to be made well?” We know Jesus could heal – but in at least this case, the question was “do you want to be made well?”



Jesus led people to articulate their needs and then to act on them: “Get up and walk.”

Jesus calls us to action: Feed the hungry, Clothe the naked, Tend the sick, Visit those in prison. The question from the righteous- that is from those who were in right relationship with God- is “Lord, when did we see you hungry, naked, sick or in prison?” Those who were in right relationship with God did not even see that they were serving God- that they were living the Gospel message- by what they did. It was so integral to them that they were puzzled by Jesus’s statement. Jesus responds with the famous line: if you fed the hungry, clothed the naked, tended the sick or visited those in prison- then you served me.

Each of the least of these carries within him- or her-self the image of God. If you can see Christ in the least among us, then you serve God.

And when we fail to see Jesus in the least among us, then we also turn away God. And we damn ourselves for judging others and for failing to help when we are able. God doesn’t sit back and wait. God is active in the world – although sometimes it can be hard to see God when flooding and famine and earthquakes and all the other horrors of the world are around us. God calls us to overcome our fears and to act with love and compassion towards others.

The role Jesus sets before us today is that of servant leadership. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. If I’m caught up in my own needs and wants, then it’s hard to serve others – and often hard to even see the wants and needs of others. One recommendation for someone suffering from depression is to get out and do one thing – even one very small thing- for another person.

When we can take ourselves out of our preoccupation with ourselves, when we can take one small step to help someone else – perhaps even something as small as helping an older person navigate the hallway to his apartment – we begin to re-engage with our world. The stranger can lead us back to health.

A deacon’s particular role in our church is to bring the needs of the world to the church. And then to help the church respond to the needs of the world. That’s one reason the deacons in this Diocese have focused their efforts on poverty. According to the US Census Bureau, the percentage of people in Indiana in poverty is higher than the national average. So, Jesus’ call to us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and tend to the sick is particularly relevant in our society today.

Jesus modeled what being a good leader- what being a good king means. He wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty. He spat in the mud, made paste, put it on a blind man’s eyes so that man could see. So that man could once again become a member of society rather than a dependent. Jesus wasn’t afraid to get wet. He stepped out on the water to lead others to faith. To show them that with faith in God, much is possible that might seem impossible. As long as Peter focused on Christ, he, too, was able to walk on water. The minute he lost his focus, Peter got wet.

Jesus wasn't afraid to leave a safe and secure life as a carpenter's son – to strike out and challenge the authorities- to call them to account when those authorities failed to honor God's call to live justly and to love mercy.

If Jesus could do these things- if feeding the 5000, if helping someone to walk or to see or to talk, were things that he was called to do, then why do we hesitate so much to reach out ourselves?

Mark Lee, pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation in Fort Collins, CO reminds us that as long as we focus on our needs- on instances where we call ourselves victims- then we cannot be part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. When we focus on our divisions, we cannot find the love of Christ in all persons – in our common vision. The kingdom of God remains a far off reality when we focus on what we have suffered rather than what Christ has brought to us as the best model of the best kind of leadership- the best kind of kingship. When we focus on our common vision and understanding that all persons are children of God, worthy of dignity and respect, regardless of outward appearance or circumstance, then rather than scarcity we can have abundance. “I came that you might have life and might have it abundantly” Jesus says. But as long as we are focused on “mine”, scarcity is our reality. Lee reminds us that conflicts will lose their significance when belief in God, belief in Jesus as Christ, becomes our all-in-all.¹

Last Sunday of Pentecost: a Sunday when we can reflect upon the last year. How well have we lived as disciples of Christ? How well have we proclaimed the Gospel to all with whom we come into contact? Have we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, tended the sick or visited those in prison? Or have we been so wrapped up in our own needs and wants – and ways in which we feel we are victims that our world has become smaller and smaller. Have we missed seeing the sunshine outside for the gloom inside?

Jesus offers help in a myriad of ways- some directly, some indirectly, and some that call us to respond and stand tall: do you want to be made well? Do you want to be restored as a fully-functioning member of society? Hard questions sometimes. Hard answers sometimes. Each, however, seeks to restore us to our full and healthy humanity.

As human beings – fallible though we try to be otherwise- we are not going to get everything right every time. So Sundays like today are times to reflect upon the past year. When we did well, celebrate. When we didn't do so well, look and see how we might do better the next time. When our focus turned inward instead of outward, be alert to the next time we're tempted to hold a pity party because life isn't exactly how we wish it might be. The Psalmist reminds us that the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his faithfulness endures from age to age. And that's a promise you can take to the bank. *Amen.*

¹ Mark Lee in Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 331.