“A Most Ingenious Paradox”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I have found myself singing Gilbert and Sullivan a lot recently, as I have been reflecting on the texts for this morning’s worship. The Pirate King and others sing a wonderful song, [singing] “a paradox, a paradox, a most ingenious paradox.” The reason I have been singing this in the past couple of weeks is that the Bible is as full of paradoxes as any good imaginative production, and maybe hinges even more particularly on our understanding them.

Today celebrates what is known as “Christ the King” Sunday, or “The Reign of Christ,” and I find myself wrestling with one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith. We raise up Jesus Christ, the son of a carpenter, as our savior King, and Jesus was not only of lowly birth, but also was a known consorter with persons of lowly occupation and distinction. Additionally, and even more *scandalously*, our King was crucified in the manner set aside for the worst criminals. This is a strange image of king to try to understand, and maybe particularly for us, in the United States, who don’t have a king.

Who reigns in the world now, in the way in which we envision a royal kingdom? When I think of royalty, I think of the United Kingdom with King Charles and sons, the princes. I have to admit, though, that the Queen, Elizabeth, felt more royal in ways I don’t begin to unpack. Although most of us were taught to swear our allegiance to the “flag,” and the various testimonies that are part of that pledge, we also are free under our constitution to say and do pretty much what we feel like saying and doing in the name of freedom, if nothing else. As citizens, we don’t owe a lot to our leaders.

This was not the case in biblical times, however, and when we read in Ezekiel about the prince David, who would become King, and in Matthew about the Son of Man who will come to rule in his Kingdom, we read about allegiances that bind the followers in far more significant ways. If I had claimed to be a subject of any of the biblical kings, my life essentially was bound to that king; I would have had to fight for the king against enemies, and my land essentially would have been subject to the king’s desires for how it would be used. You might imagine for yourselves the Knights of the Round Table and their sworn pledges to honor the name and the life of Arthur. One of the paradoxes in following Christ is that he did not hold himself up as being particularly regal, and it was he who laid down his life for us; not the other way around. He does ask that we be true to him, nonetheless, and while we may not have our heads chopped off if we don’t obey the laws that God and Christ have given us, we *are* told that there are consequences for our disobedience.

We read in Ezekiel that the Lord God will search for [God’s] sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so [God] will seek out [God’s] sheep.” We read on that God will provide God’s sheep with all the good things that they need. These are comforting words. We know that what we sometimes need is to be taught what is right and just. God knows that too, and God knew it when he gave us Jesus. By God’s grace, we have been told exactly what we need to do to be right with God. We have very explicit instructions, but we blunder nonetheless. We wander nonetheless. Thankfully, “[God] will seek the lost, and [God] will bring back the strayed, and [God] will bind up the injured, and will strengthen the weak.” God goes on to say that God will destroy the fat and the strong; that God will feed them with justice. God’s justice in this passage is to “judge” between the lean and the fat sheep, here saying that with David as shepherd King, the weak will be raised up. This is a message that Jesus carries in the New Testament in no uncertain terms. How God can raise up the weak and the lean is through us, when *in our strength*, we feed others with justice. So, paradoxically, we are both lost sheep, and those blessed to lead. God knows that we can stray from the ways in which we are meant to live, and God gives us guidance.

When we call ourselves Christian we claim our descendancy in a line of history that runs from David through to the present time. In today’s lesson from Matthew, Jesus is not only King, but also Son of Man in his glory. We might call this *the* paradox: our King, our *God*, became human, became one of us. Yes, Jesus was born in a manger, and earned his living as a carpenter, but Jesus was and is God, our King, and our Lord—our *only* Lord. The kind of ruler and king that Herod was during his life and the kind of ruler and king that Jesus was and *is* could not be more different. Herod led out of fear, by creating fear; he led by violent power over others. Jesus taught a rule of peace and a reign of justice; his subjects were few, and he was alone when he died. We know, though, that Christ’s kingdom has *not* yet come, and we are taught that *we* are meant to play a part in bringing it. We also learn in Matthew as we do in Ezekiel, and in similar terms, that our responsibility carries a judgment.

One of the difficult things about studying the Bible is sometimes in making a connection between what Jesus is referring to in the present, and what he is pointing to in the future, in the end times. In the passage from Matthew, Jesus makes abundantly clear what we must do *now* in order to find favor with God later on. “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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.” Those who sit at the right hand of the king are those closest to the ruler; they share God’s honor, and for us as Christians this means living eternally in relationship with God, with Jesus, and with those who believe. The goats, or those on the left hand, are condemned. I don’t know about you, but when I meet Jesus face to face, as we are promised we will, I don’t want to be found to be a goat. I don’t want to have a beard, and I don’t want to get butted out of the Kingdom for not recognizing Christ in the faces of the poor and the needy. There is no mistaking what Jesus says is necessary to sit at the right hand of glory *with* Christ rather than on the left hand of condemnation. There may well be a great deal of paradox in some of the images of shepherds, sheep and goats, as well as in Christ’s kingdom, but there is nothing ambiguous about what Christ calls on us to do.

We may wonder from time to time who are “the least of these,” and we don’t have to look any farther than this passage. If people are hungry, then we are meant to feed them. We do this in Blue Hill when we donate our time or food to the Simmering Pot or to the Tree of Life, and we can recognize the good in what we do. You may have heard the old adage that goes something along the lines of “if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day, but if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.” I don’t mean to suggest that we should start tying flies or heading to the river. I do want us to think long and deep, though, about the reasons that we do have so much hunger not only in developing nations, but also in our own country. It seems to me that doing for the least, in Christ’s name, means backing groups that are actively trying to amend the systems that contribute to the situation of poverty. This may also mean giving more out of our abundance to organizations that are going about the work of distributing the world’s wealth in more equitable ways.

If someone is thirsty, we are meant to give him or her something to drink. Again, from the position of our comfort, we may not see opportunity to quench the thirst of Christ. Without sickening you too much, I will tell you of my experience living in India, during which time I first boiled, then skimmed, and then double-filtered my drinking water before adding to it several drops of iodine. This was all on the occasions when I had water available to me from the tap in my small home, as well as at the frequent times when I would have to go outside to the equivalent of a 55-gallon drum to collect rain water. After once hiking to a village only accessible by foot, I knew real thirst on the climb back. I wondered what would happen to the inhabitants of that village during droughts. From where would they gather their water? If we admit to ourselves that Christ is present in the least of all humanity, is present in persons who need, we also have to admit that we are meant to help to quench the thirst of parched Indians, and Africans, and of thirsty people closer to home in the wake of hurricanes. If, instead of buying our purified drinking water, we would indulge in our plentiful taps (once they are filtered for arsenic), we would have a great deal of money to send to those organizations working to ensure that there is potable water for those who need it. Don’t get me wrong; I don’t like water that tastes bad, so I filter it even now, but I have also learned that what we have is *very good*, and I am thankful.

“And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?” I am incredibly excited that as a church we have begun the conversation to committing our time and energy to determine where are the most significant needs in our area, because there are many people right here in Hancock County who are without homes. It may be that we will be part of laying the groundwork for others to help. We may be the ones called to create new possibilities for others to assist as we walk with those who are otherwise unaccompanied in their struggles. And these are the people we will come to know.

We may also be wondering how to discern our *particular* neighbor when other nations are at war. Jesus’ call for peace must be the clarion to which we respond most avidly, without regard for national boundaries in the world that is all of our God-given home, which is God’s realm in which the Prince of Peace must reign. How may we lend our voices to assure that those who are disenfranchised may know a sense of home? If the issues of the world at large feel too great for you to the degree that your inclination is to hole up and let others sort out the problems, remember that every attempt we make even close to home can make a difference.

As much as we are cautioned against talking to strangers, as Christians we are meant to make strangers welcome. Sometimes this can be as simple as being certain that we treat persons at the cash registers of stores as well as we possibly can. This certainly can mean making concerted efforts to be hospitable to those who cross our thresholds, and I believe I have witnessed that kind of warmth in this church. The question to push us into responsible Christian action is how we make sure that our thresholds and our neighborhoods are welcoming enough that anyone will want to get close. The question to which I do not have a quick answer is how we can make welcome in our communities those who may not be seeking a *church*; they may simply be seeking a home, or a friend. How do we make sure that our larger community is one to which people, all people, even “the least” are invited? I don’t know the answer, but I strongly believe that the question needs to be asked, because without asking the question, I am afraid I will be bleating a different song than I want to someday down the line. “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.'” I want to know that I have done right by the least *and* the most of God’s children; that I have done right by Christ—and Jesus teaches me, teaches us how to do this.

Ours is a paradoxical faith. We have a King who reigns by dying; we have a God who judges and saves; and we are asked to be both shepherd and sheep. The way we follow Christ, the way that God promises we will live under Christ’s rule is to believe in Him. On this last Sunday of our liturgical year, this Reign of Christ Sunday, we can be thankful that God became human so that we can learn how to love. We can also be thankful for God’s grace that welcomes us home even when we stray, and that offers us a promise of an eternal tomorrow in Christ’s Kingdom. Amen.