

Matthew 25:31–46

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for Christ the King, Year A (Revised Common Lectionary) · 15 November 2011

I'm making a recording for you this week so that I can join you in the festivities for Christ the King Sunday, one of the great Sundays of the year, I always think, because of the texts.

Carolyn and I are getting ready to make our semiannual migration. We come out here like disoriented ducks in the fall or the springtime, and then turn around and go back, much to the amusement of our friends, right at the beginning of December. Nobody can understand why we would want to spend winter in Minnesota, I'm afraid.

The Sunday coming up is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Pentecost season. Apparently the bureaucrats are a little confused and having trouble counting, because now they want everything to be "time after Pentecost," for some pious reason that leaves all of us a little confused. I still listen to Bach's cantatas every Sunday, and of course he is on the old church calendar, so it's back to what I remember: Sundays after Trinity.

A Different Kind of Power

But now we have Christ the King Sunday, and a different kind of power is at stake. It's really fun. Wherever Christ Jesus is involved, power takes a different form.

No doubt there is some justice in the feminist suspicion of words like "king" and other male terms that designate the traditional patriarchal distribution of power. Power generally equals domination and control, dominion. Wherever there is power, somebody is going to wind up on their back, or in an even less appropriate position. And so the rest of us, those of us who for various reasons have been denied access to the halls of power, learn to be very suspicious of it. When you get a Sunday like this, which speaks of kingship and the kingdom and dominion, there is reason enough to wonder what in the world is going on.

But Jesus handles power in an entirely different way. Risen from the dead, he can truthfully say that he has death behind him. That is a favorite phrase of Robert W. Jenson, who likes to use it to describe Jesus' power. He is the only one who can look at his death in the past tense

and say, “When I died.” Gerhard Forde was always a little nervous about this. You notice how the resurrection accounts in the Gospels always bring the cross forward. The risen Christ is hungry. He eats. His wounds are evident. His human limitations are still evident. The risen one is the crucified one, and speaking of Jesus having death behind him is a little risky, because he almost brings his death along with him, just in order to triumph over it.

But it is a handy way of speaking of Jesus’ access to power. According to Romans 1, he was declared Son of God by the Spirit of holiness, by resurrection from the dead. His power is manifested above all in this: death has no dominion over him. He is free of its force, free of its power. Even though we can debate the tense of the verbs, as we will a little, I expect, he is risen from the dead. He is the only one who can look death in the eye and say, “Back off.” And so he says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

Of course, every politician in the whole history of the human race has that illusion. “The Lord has them in derision,” the psalm says. He laughs at these stupid, preposterous, strutting little minions who cross the stage dreaming of power and dominion as they go their dusky way toward death. Lots of fun. But he does have all authority in heaven and on earth. And because he has all authority, we may speak of him as king, even if we want to correct the terminology in some way. For instead of exalting himself, instead of counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, he threw himself down, as the old Christ hymn in Philippians says. He emptied himself. He took the form of a servant, and his power became manifest in this: that he gives himself away, that he bestows himself.

So the texts for Christ the King Sunday take a different turn. They’re just lots of fun. The supporting texts are redolent of love in hot pursuit. I suppose we could think of a king that way: old David hiking up his skirts and running across the alley to see Bathsheba. But this is a different kind of love. This is love that bestows itself, that throws itself down, that gives itself.

So Ezekiel 34, the Old Testament lesson, as we used to call it, describes the lengths to which God is willing to go on behalf of his sheep. In the psalm, Psalm 95, we hear the sheep rejoicing. It’s kind of fun: the sheep are singing. I don’t know if anyone has ever heard that, or would want to, but in this case there is a joyful noise anyway, as the sheep rejoice in their shepherd. Then in Ephesians 1 we have one of the great ecstatic texts in the epistles, a text in which Saint Paul, or one of his students, is singing a chorus of praise to Christ Jesus. I read it out loud last night with my dear wife after supper, and we were both practically dancing with it. It’s just fabulous. You can hardly find better texts than these.

And then of course in the gospel we get to watch the Lord Jesus being the king. He is picking out the keepers and letting the others go. How's that to give you a little shiver? That doesn't sound like love, does it, or like powerlessness either. So we had better take a close look.

The Shepherds Called to Account: Ezekiel 34

First, the supporting texts. We'll work through these quickly, because we have a gospel that is going to give us some difficulty, as it usually does.

In Ezekiel 34 the Lord God is taking on the shepherds. Of course, the framers of our lectionary don't particularly care for that. They come from the priestly caste, the liturgical types, and they like their preachers unqualified. But here the Lord God is bringing his preachers to an accounting. It is the priests he has in mind. In the verses that precede verses 11 and 12, where our lesson picks up, he holds his shepherds accountable, particularly for their abuse of the sheep. They have been feeding themselves. They have been dressing in the finest wool. They have been harvesting their sheep, but they have not been caring for them. And because of this the good Lord is ticked off, and he has come to settle things with his shepherds. They have scattered the sheep. Instead of providing for the sheep, giving to the sheep, looking after the sheep, they have been looking after themselves.

This is reminiscent of John 10: the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, when he sees the wolf coming, flees. The hired hand, when he sees the market going up on wool, flees. The hired hand sees himself in the sheep and uses the sheep for his own purposes. But the good Lord, on the contrary, loves the sheep.

What strange, crazy critters to love! Most of us are city people, but some of us still have enough rural background to know what kind of animals sheep are: the worst, stubbornest, most mulish creatures you ever saw in your whole life to work with. Contrary. They will not take direction. As my old friend Pete Walden used to say, there's nothing worse than a circle of ewes.

So we have the sheep. And unlike the normal procedure, where the sheep are butting and humping and getting into trouble, here it is the shepherds who are butting the sheep and using them for their own purposes. This shows up toward the end of our lesson, in verse 20: "Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no

longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” Here is the good shepherd, who knows what is good for the flock, who protects them against exploitation, who loves them.

All right: here’s the king. Here is the king who is different from the bad shepherds, the king who is the good shepherd, looking for good pasture and making them lie down.

The Sheep of His Pasture: Psalm 95

Psalm 95 reads more like a hymn. It is a hymn of praise. God is a great God. His claims here are mostly geographical: he claims the different regions, and so he claims to be the God above all gods. He forms the dry land. He cares for the pastures. He looks after all the different formations on behalf of his sheep, and we are the sheep of his pasture, provided for by him. So the psalm sets out the power of God in resonant terms. It forms, in effect, the chorus, repeating and emphasizing what has happened in Ezekiel and setting the stage for what is going to follow in the gospel.

The Hope of His Calling: Ephesians 1

Then Ephesians 1: promise overflowing, promise going wild, promise spilling over, promise and abundance running down over everything. It’s a little hard to think of this as a supporting text. If you are ever tempted to preach on the epistle, here it is. You could get lost in this one for a good long time.

When I was younger, starting out in this racket down in southern Oregon, I used to draw a contrast between Ephesians 1 and 1 Corinthians 15, because there is a very interesting change in tenses. This text speaks of Christ Jesus as having put all things under his feet. 1 Corinthians speaks of a time coming when he will put all things under his feet. And of course this is the difference: enthusiasm anticipates the future to the point where it breaks into the present, and there is no distinction, while the theology of the cross recognizes the hiddenness of the present, and so there is something of a struggle here.

But the older I’ve gotten, and the more my faith has been shaped by both cross and resurrection, the more willing I’ve been to hear this epistle, because it is just so full of goodness, goodness overflowing. The future is breaking out in the present. It has broken out in the present, and so it breaks out in the form of a hope that is just overpowering: “so that,

with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

Here it is. Christ Jesus has entered this world under the sign of the cross. He bears the cross and the signs of the cross; he never does quite transcend the cross in the New Testament accounts, but always brings it forward in relation to the resurrection. The power is hidden in weakness. The power is expressed in earthen vessels. And still it is real power. This is the power of the gospel breaking loose under the sign.

When you tell stories about your experiences as pastors, you tell stories, as I do, of the sign of the resurrection being given in the context of utter abandonment and despair: hospital beds, sudden deaths, and all the rest. They break out around us, reminding us that we are not in heaven yet and won't be for a while, though maybe sooner for some of us than for others. But whether we are here or on the edge of it, we live under the sign of the cross, and therefore in the hope of the resurrection. And so the power breaks out in an ecstatic hymn of grace, a glorious testimony to the God who put his power to work in Christ and who is even now working under the sign of the cross to bring the resurrection to bear.

Christ rules. He rules as a shepherd who gathers his sheep over against those who would exploit them. He rules as one who provides so munificently that he just keeps overflowing with all the blessings he has to bring.

The Sheep and the Goats: Matthew 25

With that, we turn to Matthew 25:31–46, the basic text for this Sunday. As you know from previous weeks, I generally assume that the preacher is to preach on the gospel, because here Jesus is at work directly in the story and the text, and among us as well. So let's take a look, because this is really interesting and lots of fun.

The peoples of the earth are being judged here. “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. All the nations,” *panta ta ethne*, the whole shooting match, “will be gathered before him.” And what will he do? He'll do what a king does. He'll do what a shepherd does. And he'll do what you do when you're cooking, what I do when I'm preparing supper at home: I cut the ends off the vegetables and throw away the stuff that doesn't look so good. This act of judgment is an act of power, but

right now we are the ones being sorted. And that is not so very much fun. This is threatening stuff. It looks like the kind of power we're used to, where some are saved and the others are passed over.

He puts the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. "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; 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing,'" and all the rest of it.

So the judgment continues, and then comes the reaction of the sheep. They can't imagine that they are sheep. They can't remember having done any such thing. They are inclined to deny it: "When was it that we saw you?" "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.'"

Then he turns to the left, and here is what's scary. "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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food,'" through all the same categories. "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

All right, there you have it. We say in the Creed, Sunday after Sunday, that he will come again to judge the quick and the dead, the living and the dead. And here he has done it. Are you in a hurry to get over to Ephesians? I probably am. This is a very dangerous text.

No Clue Who the Sheep Are

The temptation is always to try to find something that differentiates the sheep from the goats, some quality the sheep have that the goats don't, which explains the judgment. I suppose we could make a little progress with that temptation, though it is very much a temptation, if we go back to the creation story. You remember the snake's temptation; you can never get away from it in this text. Eve was being tempted. Luther used to say the devil went to Eve because Adam would have been too easy. He would have gone down for an apple, and he did. It wasn't even pie. He went down way too easy. The snake went to Eve because he knew she was a woman of faith, and because he knew she was worth tempting, a far greater challenge. And so, as Luther tells the creation story, the devil led Eve from believing to believing in her believing. He led her from faith in Christ to faith in her own faith, from believing in the promise of the gospel to believing in her apprehension of the promise.

What makes this text so very interesting is that these people are unconscious. The saints don't have a clue that they are saints. The sheep stand bleating and looking for feed; they don't have a clue that they are sheep. And the goats, I expect, are busy talking about how they became goats, and about the others who really aren't. That's the way it usually goes, but none of that is here. That is what's so utterly fascinating.

This is an absolutely predestinarian text. There is no difference between sheep and goat apparent to the eye. If you know anything about these animals in the Middle East, you know it's impossible to sort them out anyway. You stand looking and can hardly tell the difference. Only God can sort them out. And when God sorts them out, he doesn't do it on the basis of some quality they have, but on the basis of his sheer gift and promise.

So if you are going to preach this text, you will have to treat it like a Lutheran who has read the Formula of Concord on predestination. One of the old Lutheran rules is this: you may under any circumstances tell someone that they have been chosen to be Christ's own. You may never, under any circumstances, identify somebody as reprobate. Now, Jesus is doing that here. He knows who the saved are and who the unsaved are. But notice that he doesn't tell us. Because, of course, as soon as he tells us, we'll start separating sheep and goats. We'll have an organization of the sheep who rejoice in being sheepy, and then we'll tell the goats, "Inclusiveness is our motto. There are no goats. You're really welcome here." That's just the way it works. Tolerance becomes intolerance just that fast.

At any rate, Christ Jesus refuses to give us a clue as to who the sheep and the goats are, and any parish pastor who has hung around a congregation for a while knows how difficult it is to sort them out there. Some of the most faithful people turn out in the crisis to be absolutely faithless, and some of the most apparently faithless people in the congregation turn out to be the Rock of Gibraltar. We'll leave Christ Jesus to sort them out. That's best.

Come, O Blessed of My Father

So when you preach this text, the best thing to do is zero in on these words: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." It was prepared for you before the world was made. Christ Jesus prepared it for you before the world was made. From the beginning it was always his intention to come as near to you as your own flesh and blood, and so from the beginning you have been his goal. And now,

at the end, he stands and beckons: “Come on, you’re welcome here. I’ve got this all set up. Your place is all prepared. Ready to go?” What fun.

I expect you are going to have to work at it a little, because people get nervous around predestination. They run for cover like mice fleeing the morning sun, as Luther used to say. They run for cover because God is being God here. He is the king. Because he is the king, he comes to hold his shepherds accountable, including you. Because he is the king, he rejoices in providing all the different geographical forms necessary to make good pastures. Because he is the king, he brings his power under the sign of weakness; nobody else could ever pull that off. And because he is the king, when he judges, he lets the word out ahead of time.

My goodness, you’ve been baptized! Look at that. You weren’t conscious of a thing. My goodness, there you have been at the table all these times: the body of Christ, given for you. And there you have heard it: “Your sin is forgiven for Jesus’ sake.” And so you are among the chosen, and you will hear him say it. Your goal is to stand up on Sunday and say, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the world was made.” Now there’s something to preach on, and there’s some fun.

So he becomes our king by giving himself away, and as our king he chooses and calls. He sends his Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, sanctify, and keep, and so to preserve us as people of faith.

I think that about wraps up what I have for you. We’ll be together next week; I’ll be around here. After that I’ll be greeting you from the road, so we’ll record ahead again and break our way through, and I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGSW8e4hadI>

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