

Christ King
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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End-games and Game plans

I preface this sermon by recognizing that we stand on land that once belonged to the Upper Skagit people, whose current territory is now restricted to an 84-acre reservation east of Sedro Wooley plus another 15 acres the tribe purchased north of there. This is, perhaps, more than a preface; it is a good Segway into the theme for the day. This is Christ King Sunday. Where Christ is king, things are not always what they seem, and those who are on top of the heap may not always or even really be so. Where Christ is king, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

I would also like to thank those who weighed in on the Survey about Christ King. It is clear that when we talk about King Jesus it's got to be nuanced. Some of us are clearly uncomfortable with the title applied to Jesus at all, something they can't relate to. Kings are human institutions of power and don't fit with how they understand Jesus. One person felt that the title "king" for Jesus empowers the idea of Jesus but also makes him distant, and I can see how that makes sense. For others it calls for a different kind of leadership, one that is selfless and focused on the good of the people rather than the leader.

I would like to begin the discussion by nuancing it liturgically rather than theologically. Next week is the first Sunday of Advent, launching us into a new cycle. Each cycle begins with creation, marches through prophecy, the incarnation, Jesus' earthly life and ministry, through the Cross and the first Easter, taking us to Pentecost and the Age of the Church. What happens then? Jesus returns; the *Parousia*, to use a theological term; the final reckoning of all things. Jesus is finally recognized as the one on whose kingdom all earthly kingdoms ultimately must depend.

(We must remember that we do so from a strictly Christian point of view. Other religious traditions have different pictures of the final resolution of all things. This is ours.)

The celebration didn't start out that way. It was established in 1925 by Pope Pious XI for the Roman Catholic Church. It was to be celebrated on the last Sunday of October. Lutherans know that Sunday well. It is the Sunday they celebrate Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church in Whittenburg, Reformation Sunday. More than one reliable source notes that Pope Pious' intent was apparently, not very pious. It was a counterpoint to the Protestants, meant to shout down the celebration of Reformation Sunday. The polemic was resolved in 1970 when the date was changed to its more propitious current status, allowing it to transcend its early banal intent and claim something truly magnificent.

Christ King Sunday celebrates the end-game of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whenever we consider a game plan we must first think about the end-game. Where we want to end up determines the path we will take to get there. Whenever we run into passages like this,

we must always remember that its purpose is not primarily to inform us of things to come, but to inspire us on how to live now. Living in any kingdom of which Jesus will be shown to be king invites us into a different way of being in the world before that great revealing.

Today's lessons all head in that direction. The prophet Ezekiel's oracle today is pronounced against the faithless leadership of Israel. The book tries to explain how it could be that God's chosen people were conquered by Babylon, and the powerful and elite carried away in disgrace into exile. God is justified in allowing it to happen because Israel has been so impossibly unfaithful. He lays the blame at the feet of the leadership, precisely the ones taken into exile. Their negligence has let the flock go feral. Here, however, is a message of hope. God will bring a faithful shepherd who will reunite the flock. Therefore, it's time to act like a decent flock. It's time to quit butting one another and shouldering one another around! The end-game has a game plan.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the author sets the context for the Church. He prays for his readers, and reminds them of just who they are and where they stand. They are living the power of God manifest in the resurrection, the act that will finally place Jesus at the center of the universe of God. Therefore, Ephesian Christians, though you are downtrodden and oppressed by the Roman authorities, God has an end-game, and that dictates the game plan. Take heart, endure, remain faithful, for God's got this one.

Finally, the Gospel lesson for today talks about a great moment of judgment when the Son of Man (Jesus) will separate the sheep from the goats. The end-game seems to clearly be that sheep are going to be alright and goats are not. The difference has to do with how we live the game plan. The interesting thing is that the sheep, the ones who "get it," don't know they "got it." Clearly, "getting it" has little to do with being a sheep, and "not getting it," has nothing to do with being a goat. You don't even have to know the end-game if you know the game plan. The game plan is how you love the least of these. Do you do it to be noticed by the King? If so, it doesn't count. Do you do it because of the humanity of the "least of these," then it does.

St. Damien of Molokai was a Roman Catholic priest and missionary to Hawaii. He lived and worked in a government mandated leper colony on the Kalaupapa peninsula of the island of Molokai. He built roads, schools and clinics. He shared life with them. After 11 years he died of leprosy himself.

Someone told Mother Teresa of Calcutta that they wouldn't wash a leper for a million dollars. She is reported to have replied, "Neither would I. You can only wash a leper for love."

I've told this story before, but I tell it again because it is so compelling to me. A 73-year-old man in Honduras looked at me intently once and said, "I know why you come to Honduras. Jesus told you to go to the least of these, and we're the least of these." I have never, ever explained our mission to Honduras in these terms, and I would not, for out of

my mouth it would be condescending and disrespectful, but I will forever be humbled by the words of this great "least of Jesus' brothers."

Jesus came to earth to save us from our self-absorbed sinful unfaithfulness, not to impress the Father, but because God loves us. Nothing more than our humanity and nothing less than the Cross. Period. Divine, self-giving love. This doesn't sound very kinglike to us, but in God's way of thinking, it's the only way to be one. And so we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

I have been very mindful of late, and rather concerned with the deep divisions in our society today. The boundaries are stark. Coasts vs. heartland, rural vs. urban, Republican vs. Democrat, conservative vs. progressive, with violence being perpetrated by both sides. We seem to live in two different universes who happen to share a common geography. There are churches that have aligned themselves with one side or another. Endorsing candidates and pressuring members to vote in given directions and not in others. This passage of Jesus calls us to something deeper. No matter where you stand on the political spectrum, no matter whose rhetoric makes the most sense to you, King Jesus has only one end-game, and it's not pie in the sky, by and by. It's a world that reflects his own self-giving heart. Therefore, the Church of Jesus has only one game-plan: To give ourselves away for the sake of the ones we would be most tempted to call "the least of these." This is what King Jesus did, and it is what we are called to do.

Who, then, are the least of these? The LA Times is known as a left-leaning news agency. They recently ran an editorial page of letters they got from the right in an attempt to bridge the gap and listen to "the other side." I read the contributions. I didn't agree with everything, but I could also find common ground. I can see myself sitting down with some of them and saying, "Tell me more." If the LA Times can do it, can't we?

Meditation Questions

1. Who are those you would put at the bottom of the list?
2. Do you know anyone who fits that description personally?
3. How can you love them as Jesus has loved you?