

What Matters in the End

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The Celebration of the Reign of Christ

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“When the Human One comes in his glory...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.” — Matthew 25:31–32

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, the day Christians in our wing of the church call the Celebration of the Reign of Christ. The conviction that Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, is the ultimate ruler, rather than any temporal ruler, comes from, among other places, the scene of the final judgment from Matthew’s gospel,

which Dean read for us a few minutes ago. You can find that scene carved in stone above the main doors of many Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals in Europe. That forbidding depiction of judgment was meant to remind all who passed through those doors of what ultimately matters for Christian people: caring for those who cannot care for themselves. “When you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The denomination of which this church is a part lifted up that idea – that the cosmic Christ, ruler of the universe, comes to us incarnated as the vulnerable, the marginalized, the stranger, and the destitute – and developed the Matthew 25 initiative. Churches like this one who self-describe as Matthew 25 churches use this portion of Matthew’s gospel much in the same way and for the same reason that stone masons carved scenes of the last judgment in the tympana of Medieval cathedrals: so that followers of Jesus would remember what matters in the end. And it all comes down to one thing:

compassion. Without an extreme stretch of imagination, Matthew 25 Christians can rightly say, with the Dalai Lama, that compassion isn't part of their religion; compassion *is* their religion. To see ourselves this way might help us recover an earlier vitality that caused Tertullian in the third century to quote Roman pagans marveling at Christians, "See how they love one another!"

The love that Tertullian was describing and at which pagan Romans were marveling was embodied with transcendent clarity, Christians believe, in Jesus of Nazareth, whom they claimed as their true and only leader. Pope Pius felt it was essential to remind Christians of that allegiance amidst a swelling tide of rival claimants, and that legion has not disbanded.

When I first began preaching about this day, America did not have *No Kings* marches. Most of us never imagined we would. But here we are. As a nation we insist that we have no king; as Christians we

insist that we do — a sovereign who called himself simply the Human One, whose realm is not of this world.

This feast is relatively new. Pope Pius XI instituted it in 1925 as Europe reeled from the First World War — a conflict that devoured more than fifteen million lives and resolved nothing. In its aftermath, secularism, nationalism, and political desperation surged.

Mussolini had brutally taken power. Hitler was finding his malignant voice. And Christians, in growing numbers, were drifting toward leaders who promised strength by making their nations great again, but who in fact trafficked in lies, violence, and fear.

The pope created this feast to remind Christians of their true allegiance and to call them back to the values embodied by the Prince of Peace. It didn't "work" at the time. Fascism continued to seduce nominal Christians, and within two decades Europe plunged again into catastrophic war. We still live beneath the shadow of the mushroom cloud that closed that chapter of human folly.

So the question remains: *Is it true?*

Is Christ the sovereign that Matthew describes?

Does the slain Lamb of God really reign?

Is the Christian vision of the end of all things truth or wishful thinking?

If you choose the view of the celebrity atheists — that religion is fantasy at best and narcotic at worst — there's nothing I or any preacher can say to dislodge that conviction.

But most of you have gathered this morning because you believe something else. You believe the Christian vision is not escapist fantasy but a hope rooted in God's character. Matthew's vision — sheep and goats, right and left — distills to one essential truth, captured memorably by former megachurch pastor Rob Bell: *love wins*.

In this world, we see and are told, power wins — brute, ruthless, self-protective power. The only rule is the Golden Rule of the gold:

those who have it make the rules. But Christian faith sees something deeper. Our central symbol is not a flag, a weapon, or an ideology, but a cross — horizontal and vertical, earthbound and God-directed. At that intersection we locate our lives: we surrender the old life in order to receive the new.

That is why Protestant crosses are empty. The emptiness is not a denial but a proclamation: brutality does not have the last word. God does.

This conviction reaches back to Ezekiel, our first reading. Ezekiel prophesied to exiles whose world lay in ruins because their leaders had failed — kings, priests, prophets, all of them. Yet God spoke a new word: *“I myself will search for my sheep... I will seek the lost... bind up the injured... strengthen the weak... and feed them with justice.”* When everything else collapsed, God remained faithful. That prophetic hope flows directly into Christian hope.

And so we believe in a God who has not abandoned creation, whose will for wholeness cannot be permanently thwarted, whose self-giving love is stronger than every evidence against it. We cannot prove these claims — not creation as gift, not Easter as victory, not the promise of a new heaven and new earth. We cannot prove that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

But we *can* believe it. And on the basis of that belief we commit our lives to it, and we share it.

In the end, the life of faith comes down to this: faith. Long ago I heard a preacher say that democracy survives only if people believe in it enough to stand for it until they're the last ones standing.

Christianity is similar. If you believe the Christian story — truly believe it — you live it until the end, not because you can prove it but because you trust it with your life.

The story of God's redemptive love has many facets. It speaks to each of us differently. It cannot be confined to narrow historical

criteria. It is true because we stake our lives on it, and that is a truth no argument can replace.

Mother Teresa once was asked whether she considered her work successful in the face of overwhelming need. She replied, “God has not called me to be successful. God has called me to be faithful.”

And that, friends, is what matters in the end. As we stand on the threshold of another Christian year, we remember what we so easily forget: that in the reign of Christ — the reign that is coming and the reign that is already among us — love wins. And we are called not to prove it, but to live it.

It really is, finally, about faith.