

“A Royal Pain”
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Readings: Matthew 14:22-33

November 20, 2011

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹“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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And 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.’ ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of

the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

One of history's greatest monuments to irony, the Basilica of Saint Francis boasts two sanctuaries, top to bottom frescoes, strong arches and columns, and glittering gilt and stained glass. The church is stunning, awe-inspiring, humbling. It is difficult to awe a jaded 21st century traveler like myself, but by the time the Upper Basilica was finished in 1253, Assisi was already the destination for countless pilgrims. I imagine those 13th century pilgrims: limp from days of walking and trusting, blistered from mile upon mile of hill and valley; thirsty and hungry, in stomach, mouth, and soul. I imagine those pilgrims, crossing that final hill, the basilica at first view, the last limps, and then – crossing the threshold into that upper sanctuary – the intense intake of breath, the deliberate scan, the slow look up, the endless expanse reaching heavenward... I imagine that final exhausted sinking to the knees, the kneeling in the face of this palatial sanctuary. This building worthy, finally reflective, if only ever-so reflective, of the glorious, humbling, powerful, omnipotent reign of a Christ called King.

Christ *the* King.

Of course, all of this is built on the site of an old prison execution and burial ground. St Francis, the saint that ostensibly inspired this basilica, asked to be buried as a pauper among criminals. This artistic and architectural masterpiece of a basilica was built up over a man who gave up everything he owned, who wrote the vow of poverty, who preached to little birds, who inspired millions to pursue a life of humility and service.

The contrast between this man and his basilica is striking. No more so than in one of the Giotto frescos painted inside the church depicting the moment the order of St. Francis was confirmed – St. Francis and his few followers kneel in their brown hassocks before Pope Innocent III and his bishops in their robes and splendor. Innocent and Francis, two followers of Christ, facing one another.

Innocent III did confirm Francis' order, but it is worth noting: Francis of Assisi and his way of life was an incredible threat to the pope. Assisi espoused giving up worldly goods, called everyone to poverty, spoke against splendor. The more people saw Assisi as someone they could relate to, the more they questioned papal actions, the more they turned away from papal authority. To counter this, after Assisi's death, the 13th century papacy took an interesting tactic: they tried to associate Assisi more and more with Christ. They advertised the stigmata in his hands he had hidden; they beatified him and

called him holy. For them, the closer Assisi could be associated with Christ, the quicker they could tell folks Francis of Assisi was inimitable. Above reproach, but also above inspiration. Beyond the reach of normal people. Someone to be revered. But not someone to whom we could relate. King Jesus was beyond reach. Assisi, too, was beyond reach. Threat dissipated.

As theologian Douglas John Hall says, “it is easy enough to claim belief in God. But the question... is, simply, *which God?*”¹ You see, it wasn’t enough that Innocent and Assisi both worshipped Jesus. How they saw Jesus made all the difference. It mattered then, and it matters now: *which Jesus* do we claim?

Today, perhaps you have gathered, is Christ the King Sunday. I’ll be honest, the idea of preaching on Christ the King Sunday did not sit entirely well with me. King language certainly tugs at my soul, but not quite the right way. I may make an exception on Easter for a quality Handel’s Messaiah, but usually too many praise lyrics of King of Kings and Lord of Lords trigger distaste. Too much language of domination and power and I begin to develop a touch of anxious pain. I’m certainly not alone in this. Our American minds are well-trained. King-ship is for the history books, period costume films, or maybe for some of us... I mean, not me, but some of us... the tabloids. And frankly even then, some of us prefer to acknowledge the queens, thank you very much.

So as a church, today might best be a time we just remember that Pope Innocent III got it wrong, think about how hierarchies are for the unenlightened, and hold up the sad reality that subjugation is often all-too painful.

But of course, Matthew won’t let us do that. Or really, Jesus won’t let us do that. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is talking to his disciples and he describes *himself*... sitting on a throne of glory. King and judge. Royal and powerful. In today’s scene, Jesus claims full authority – he is here the one to be obeyed.

As Jesus separates the sheep from the goats based on their treatment of others in today’s passage, it is clear that Jesus cares about what we do with our lives. And it is clear that, as king, he has a claim on our lives. If Christ is king, as he is here, our lives are not our own. We are Christ’s *subjects*.

I imagine both Innocent III and Francis of Assisi knew this passage well. As I look back at that fresco by Giotto, I wonder if this scene in Matthew occurred to either one of them in that moment – the moment of one man bowing before the throne of another. One looking the part of king, one looking the part of poor carpenter.

¹ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*. Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MN: 2003. 76.

There is no doubt Innocent III embraced Christ the King language. But the truth is – as easy as it would be to contrast worship of king with worship of carpenter – Assisi must have embraced Christ as King too. Must have embraced it with every fiber of his being. Assisi lived as though Christ had a true claim on his life. He lived a life not his own. He lived in obedience. He lived as subject. Francis of Assisi surely sang praise songs full of king language. And I imagine if I heard him sing such songs, the words would still tug at my soul – but cause a different kind of pain. The kind of pain that makes me feel unworthy, insufficient, humbled, goat-like.

Because Assisi lived a life that held together the entirety of our passage today from Matthew: a passage where Jesus refers to himself as king, yes, but also as the least. Jesus begins the passage by placing himself on the throne of glory, but ends it saying “truly I tell you, just as you did this to one of the least of these, you did it to me”. Jesus here becomes one of the least of these. Jesus simultaneously puts on the mantle of glory and the cloak of shame. Jesus simultaneously claims eternal power, and re-defines power entirely. Jesus simultaneously calls us to live lives not our own while living a life not *his* own. A life for others. A life for us.

We can and should hold this passage in tension with the many passages in the Gospels and Paul’s letters reminding us that Jesus’ forgiveness knows no bounds, those passages reminding us that the grace Jesus offers does not depend on us at all, does not depend on our actions – those verses that remind us God’s grace is offered freely. But this passage also leaves no question that Jesus cares about us... and that means caring about how we act. Caring about how we treat one another. We matter to Christ the king; so it matters how we act for others.

Innocent III was right – Jesus is ultimately inimitable, beyond compare in love and sacrifice. But Assisi was also right: if we are called to glorify a Christ beyond compare, we are called to do so by working as Christ did for and among the least of these. To serve the poor, the hungry, the inmate, the foreigner. We can no longer see ourselves as anything but bound to one another as fellow-bearers of Christ’s humble image. If we worship a power like Jesus, than we can no longer worship the powers of wealth, of domination, of self-sufficiency. If we are called to bow before a least-of-these ruler, than we must ask ourselves... how do we do that in a world geared for and by the most-of-these? How do we do that when we *are*, in so many ways, the most of these? How do we do that when the last thing we would ever admit is those times we might actually be one of the least?

This passage in Matthew is difficult and far-reaching. It can be exhausting and, I admit, tempting to avoid. How many times have I, have any of us, turned away? Ignored the

face of Christ in others? This passage taunts us with judgment. But... it is also full of hope. Because while we have good reason not to like the word 'King' as we've seen it, we are here assured a different *kind* of king. A different *kind* of judge. Assisi's kind of king and judge. This passage is full of hope because if *Christ* is King, than the ultimate power does not look like earthly power. It does not look like oppressive regimes. It does not look like subjugation for the sake of profit. It does not look like abuse at someone else's hands. The ultimate power does not look like the unforgiving power of guilt. It does not look like the fickle power of illness. It does not look like the weighty power of loneliness or depression. It does not look like the overwhelming power of death.

Christ's kingship looks like someone hungry. It looks like a prisoner. It looks like a stranger. It looks like a baby writhing in a manger. It looks like a body, broken and bleeding – someone made royal not by inflicting pain, but bearing it. God's power looks like bread and wine, dripping with covenant grace.

Our king looks like a poor man inviting us to table, welcoming us to a great feast of love.

Fellow pilgrims - *that's* a king worth sinking to our knees before. *That's* a king worth bowing down to.

Amen