

**Sermon for Proper 29 (Year A) – November 26, 2023**  
**Preached at Saint Aidan’s Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon**  
**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ps. 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matt. 25:31-46**

How do you picture Jesus? As the Good Shepherd? As the friend of children? As someone who can still the storms? As the one who heals the blind and lame? As one who teaches us about God? Others may think of Jesus as a brother, companion, or friend. But no matter how we picture him, our images of Jesus guide and influence our lives.

Isn’t it interesting that we rarely picture Jesus as judge? We think of Jesus as friend and redeemer, as the one who affirms us, but rarely do we think of Jesus as the one who judges us. Maybe that’s because the image of Jesus as judge is associated almost exclusively with the passage we read today from the Gospel of Matthew. For many contemporary people, this image of Christ as the King who exercises authority and executes judgment is virtually incomprehensible.

Such an image evokes a distance, such as Paul’s vision of the pre-existent Christ who has absolute dominion over the universe. The danger here is that Christ’s authority will be understood as something completely outside of our experience, something that stands over against us. And that is an authority that we, as well-formed, self-actualized, post-modern individuals, as people convinced of our own power and autonomy—that is an authority that we will inevitably reject.

But the strength of any “authority” is precisely that it is outside of us. The Biblical theologian, Leander Keck, rightly notes that true authority is not self-generated. Rather, it stands over against us because it has its own integrity. But that very strength—its otherness—can also be its weakness. As we know, it is far easier for external authority to achieve “compliance,” rather than inspire true “obedience.”

You see, there is a difference between external authority and that which gives authorization. By “authorization” I mean that process which energizes and empowers our inner self. To be “authorized” is to be given the inward power to actualize that which is greater than what we are and what we do. Or as Saint Augustine of Hippo put it more succinctly and gracefully, “We imitate whom we adore.”

Keck argues that Jesus authorizes a particular quality of life by energizing the world and engaging our imagination. When this occurs, the external fact of Jesus is internalized and becomes a driving force for life. Jesus’ teachings and ministry and his intimate relationship with God are offered to us as a dynamic pattern for our own lives. We find that when we do something, we are becoming something for the sake of Jesus.

It is, of course, much easier to appeal to Jesus as an external authority, to quote him, to cite some verse from scripture. But if Jesus is to be the inner authorizer, then Jesus must become one's companion, one's friend, one's mentor and guide. This is why Paul can also speak of Christ "dwelling in us," or Christ "being formed in you." This internalization of Jesus as the authorizing presence is what we mean by that old word, "sanctification."

We may consult authorities, such as the dictionary or encyclopedia, but we are not internally authorized or energized by such authority. For us to look to Jesus as our King we must be steadily exposed to him, in word and sacrament, in prayer and action, until we find ourselves shaped by him, inwardly energized by him. This will not happen all at once: it is in fact a lifelong process, subtle and gradual. But the result is a certain disposition, a readiness to speak and act in ways that reflect his gospel of love, justice and mercy.

This is what it means to be convinced of the reign of Christ, not in the remote past or the indefinite future, but in the present moment. This is what it means to be convinced of the reign of Christ in the substance of human affairs on every level of complexity and risk. This is a different kind of kingship, a different mode of authority from that to which we are accustomed. It is the rule of the Savior-King who operates within our lives, who has the power to call into question all oppressive human structures.

What I want to suggest today is that Jesus is the authorizing judge. This is not a welcome image in a time when what we want most is affirmation and inclusion. But Matthew's image of Jesus as judge reminds us that there is no authorization without accountability. Even though each week we assert that Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead," the image of Jesus as judge has virtually disappeared from Christian conversation.

By disposing of the last judgment, there is no judgment other than the one we pass upon ourselves. But we have consistently shown that we are inherently unable to discern ourselves truthfully. Once Christ's judgment has disappeared, all judgments become relative. We lose the sense that one is accountable to Jesus whose "court" is not within history, but beyond it.

Just ask yourself: "To whom am I accountable?" And, "For what am I accountable?" If Jesus is our judge, we are accountable to a person, to God's historical incarnation, to the risen Lord whose indwelling spirit continues to guide and direct our lives. His life has its own integrity: it is an historical event, not some intellectual abstraction. He does not give us the values by which we can judge ourselves. He *is* the criterion. We are judged by the person Jesus actually was, the person Jesus still is.

But while Jesus is our judge, it is equally important to recognize that the judge is Jesus! By that I mean that our judge is also our redeemer. The one to whom we are accountable is also the one who pardons and forgives. Because Jesus is the authorizer, he also has the right to forgive us for our failures. Principles and goals do not forgive. Principles and goals cannot forgive.

Perhaps that's why contemporary standards of ethics have so little to say about sin and failure. I believe when there is no forgiveness the result is anxiety and fear. But we are judged by the one who knows what failure feels like, the one who proclaims that the first will be last, that the weak are the strong, and that the foolish are the wise.

It is in the suffering of the human family that we hear the voice of our judge: there in the hungry and the naked, the stranger and the widow, the prisoner and captive, in all the world's fear and anxieties. And this is the source of our hope: that the King who sits upon the throne in judgment is the one who laid down his life for us, who did for us that which we cannot do for ourselves, whose judgment upon us is but the other side of his unfathomable love for us.

If we would look for him today, if we seek to worship our “king,” we shall not discover him clothed in the garments of unbridled power which demand our attention and respect. Instead we shall find him both within and without where he robes himself in the frailty of our flesh, in the rhythms of conflict and peace, in the patterns of pain and pleasure which forever move through human life.

Christ is our King! Here in our struggle and desire to be witnesses to his life and his love for us, he reigns.

Christ is our King! Here in the world, hidden in the hands reaching out for food and shelter, in those who struggle for justice and peace, he reigns.

Christ is our King! Here in the lives of women and men who have abandoned the futile strategies of fear and intimidation for a politics of hope and mercy: here he reigns.

Christ is our King! Here in our hearts, in our lives, he reigns—forever and ever! Amen.