

The Festival of Christ the King
November 19-20, 2011
Matthew 25:31-46

“Distressing Disguise”

As we draw near to Thanksgiving, the whole Occupy movement – Occupy Wall Street, Occupy DC, etc. – is wearing thin for many Americans. The protests and calls for governmental change have turned ugly and violent in different places; thankfully, not here in Washington, D.C. Some have drawn parallels between this and the civil unrest and calls for governmental reform that swept through the Arab world earlier this year, which has been called the “Arab spring.” I cannot speak to any connection here, but it is interesting to note that the nation of Jordan kept a very low profile throughout this, perhaps because they are ruled by royalty and so a potential target for such protests. Twelve years ago in 1999, the long-ruling King Hussein of Jordan died. His eldest son, Abdullah, assumed the throne upon his father’s death and has been ruling ever since. When he began his reign, King Abdullah sought to make himself a man of the people and a worthy successor to his much-loved father. In order to see for himself how things were going in the kingdom, the king took to disguising himself as an ordinary citizen – cameraman, and a cabdriver, among other things – in order to see firsthand the state of affairs in his nation. Of course, this created quite a stir among Jordanians. They never knew when they would encounter their king because they never knew what he would look like. On this last Sunday of the church year called the Festival of Christ the King, at the final judgment our King tells us how He comes to us now, not in his glory, but as Mother Teresa of Calcutta described it in “distressing disguise.” Christ our King comes to us now in the face of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and those who need to be clothed, the sick and those imprisoned. Christ our King tells us clearly that by ministering to **“one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me”** (Matthew 25:40). The message for this day is entitled “Distressing Disguise.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

Christ our King is really our Shepherd King. That is how today’s Gospel lesson begins, with the Lord Jesus our Good Shepherd separating sheep from goats on that great and final day. That theme of shepherding runs throughout the appointed Old Testament reading (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24) and the Psalm (Psalm 95:1-7a). Both affirm the great love that God our Shepherd has for his sheep: **“I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice”** (Ezekiel 34:16). But it is also a word of judgment against those whose focus in life is only on themselves, who ignore and trample on the needs of other, more vulnerable sheep. And of course, we do not like to hear about judgment; it makes us uncomfortable and causes us to squirm. In the value-neutral, permissive culture that we live in, to be called “judgmental” is one of the first things out of our mouth when someone confronts us or disagrees with us. “Who are you to judge me?” And yet, we do judge and make judgments every day. The difference between our present situation and that before us in the Gospel is that Christ our King is the divinely-appointed Judge; not some human judge prone to corruption, bribery, or miscarriage of justice; not some TV judge who has entertainment value. No, it will be Jesus our Shepherd King, no longer in distressing disguise, but appearing **“in his glory, and all the angels with him”** (Matthew 25:31). He is the One whom **“God has put all things in subjection under his feet”** (1 Corinthians 15:27).

The final judgment scene in the Gospel lesson is full of opposites: sheep and goats, right and left, blessed and cursed, eternal life and eternal punishment. It should be noted what Jesus says to the sheep on his right hand versus what He says to the goats on his left. To the sheep He says: **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”** (Matthew 25:34), but to the goats He says: **“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”** (Matthew 25:41). Consistent with the whole of Scripture, God’s desire is that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus (1 Timothy 2:3-5). Nothing gladdens the heart of God more than this very thing; that they come into the kingdom which God has prepared for all who love him from the very beginning of the world. For those who reject this gift, another place awaits them, but it’s one that was not created for them – **“the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”**

How, then, are we to live in this time until Christ our King comes again? First and foremost, God calls us to repentance – a change of heart and mind, a turning from the old life of sin that focuses only on self. This repentance itself is God’s work, not our own doing; it is through the power of the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith in Jesus. He is our Shepherd King who is also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is that Good Shepherd who has laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11) and shed his blood for us upon the cross. Through his death, we have received life – that full and abundant life which He alone can bring (John 10:10) that begins now, and will only be fully realized when He comes again. And having received this gift of full and abundant life in Jesus, He now calls us to share his life with those around us, including those who hunger and thirst, the stranger, the naked, the sick and imprisoned. These works of love have an eternal dimension, and those who do them, Jesus tells us, don’t even realize the full impact: that in serving others they are actually serving Jesus himself. Today as Thanksgiving baskets are being assembled for Koinonia families, and as we fill our bags for the Thanksgiving Eve service, we do these things mindful of the words of our Shepherd King: **“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me”** (Matthew 25:40).

The last time the world saw Jesus was in the distressing disguise of a man hanging upon the cross with the inscription above him that read: **“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”** (John 19:19). But when the world will see Jesus again, it will no longer be in distressing disguise, but robed in majesty and seated on his glorious throne. Until then, brothers and sisters, let us walk by faith, doing on earth those things which prepare us for heaven. Amen.