St John's Episcopal Church
Proper 29 – Last Sunday after Pentecost – Christ the King
Rev Brian C Justice

Psalm 100
Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24
Ephesians 1.15-23
Matthew 25.31-46

Christ the King:
Not Duality, But Unity
Not Retribution, But Restoration

Today, the last Sunday after the Pentecost, we celebrate Christ the King. In the Gospel of Matthew 25.31-46, we are given a vision of the kingship of Christ in the Kingdom of God.

This text is the third vision of the Kingdom presented in chapter 25.

These visions are not easy. But like many things in the world, these visions may appear to be one thing when they are really another. Jesus the teacher is never lacking in irony when it suits his teaching.

In each of the three visions, Jesus presents, on the literal level, an unadorned duality: first, the five wise bridesmaids and the five foolish bridesmaids; second, the two "good and trustworthy" slaves and the one "wicked and lazy" slave; and third, the sheep and the goats.

But in each vision, Jesus breaks through the literal level to the spiritual level. He shatters the duality that appears on the surface and reveals to us the unity that hides behind the surface: he opens for us the higher and deeper and wider unity that is the reality of the Kingdom of God.

For in the Kingdom of God -- where Christ the King reigns -- there is but one law, the law of love, love unvanquished.

In this love, we are commanded to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick, and to visit the imprisoned.

In this love, we are beyond duality.

In this love, everyone is bound together in restorative, relational unity.

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How many Christian preachers and teachers, lured by a reductively literal reading of the text, have themselves been caught in the net of duality?

Reading Matthew 25 on a literal level, they divide the world into "Us" and "Them."
Into those who profess the right beliefs and those who do not.
Into those who belong to the right tribe and those who do not.
Into those who deserve our love and those who do not.
Into those who are saved and those who are not.

But this imposes an interpretation on the text that is not warranted.

With preconceived notions of heaven and hell, of salvation and damnation, of Us and Them, they read the text as a description of the *we who are saved* and the *they who are damned.*

In doing this, they interpret God's justice as retributive rather than restorative.

They assume that the vision describes a final fate at the end of time when God will save the sheep and God will damn the goats.
They imagine a God who will meet out a horrific retribution for the past rather than a God who is working out a majestic restoration in the present and in the future.

But if unvanquished love is the law of the Kingdom of God and if the one who reigns as the King of that Kingdom is the one who offered himself in obedience to that love and made *a perfect sacrifice for the whole world,* then God's justice must be ultimately restorative rather retributive.

If restoration rather than retribution is the nature of God's justice, then ...

Perhaps the judgment of the goats is not at the end of time when all is already lost. That would be retribution.

Perhaps the judgment of the goats is now, in the present moment, when all is still possible.

That would be restoration.

Where Christ the King reigns, judgment is not of wrath unappeased, but of love unvanquished.
Where Christ the King reigns, judgment is not a casting aside, but a call to wake up.

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In the 4th century, Martin of Tours, a soldier in the Roman cavalry stationed in Gaul (now France), came upon a miserable man begging by the gate of the city. It was a bitter cold day in the depths of a harsh winter. The man was half naked. He was in agony. Martin saw other soldiers simply pass by the man.

But something in Martin was awakened: it was the judgment of God.
It was not at the end of time; it was in the present moment.
It came not from wrath, but from love.
It was not a dismissal, but an invitation.

Suddenly, Martin did not see any real difference between himself and the naked beggar. In their shared humanity, they were one, not two. Martin was wide awake and he was filled with compassion. He stopped, he got down off of his horse, he drew his dagger, and he cut his purple cloak of heavy wool in half and wrapped the naked man in it.

That night, Martin had a dream. Christ the King was standing before him, wearing the purple cloak of the beggar. He looked at Martin and said, "Blessed are you, Martin, for I was naked and you gave me clothing."

Amen.