

When I was Rector at St. Alban's in El Cajon we served a homeless meal in the park and there was a particular homeless woman who would always introduce herself in the following way, "Hello, my name is Sarah and I am a daughter of the King." The first time she told me this I had to ask her to repeat it to make sure I heard her correctly – so she said it again, "I am a daughter of the King." Now, I know we have a women's group in the Episcopal Church and a very active group here at St. James called the Daughters of the King-it's a great name. But this woman was not referring to that organization –as she explained it to me, she was a child of God – and that as such, she was a daughter of the King. I wholeheartedly agreed with her. If nothing else, I knew this woman had some solid theology under her belt when it came to her identity as a child of God...and I think her example rubbed off on others in a positive way too.

And today is the celebration in our calendar of Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of our church year before we begin our New Year celebration next Sunday with Advent I, a new liturgical year. Today is a special day to me because I was ordained 15 years ago on this feast day in Michigan. And it's a special day to me because I love the concept of kingship that is offered by the Jesus in the Gospels. But in order to appreciate it, it requires some unpacking of the theme and our text. Because in general, kings are not particularly helpful spiritual examples.

In fact, when we read in Ezekiel today we are reading about the problems that stemmed from their earthly kings in Israel- instead of serving the people, their kings had been misusing the people and scattering them, taking the land and wealth for themselves instead of sharing it with their subjects, and so the people became dispersed and lost throughout the Mediterranean and as far as Babylon. A quick read through any history book will remind us of the many problems we have had with corrupt and greedy earthly powers – the monarchs, leaders, and emperors that have failed their people (even the world) miserably. And when the Church itself has been in power, we have also failed miserably many times. So kingship is not a great concept for us and it is easily misunderstood...but what Jesus does in this passage in Matthew 25 is he completely turns the concept of kingship upside down from everything we know about kings, redefining kingship to the point that it is nearly unrecognizable to us.

Jesus is good at that. We have a king sitting on his throne in this story who is busy executing judgement – but notice that this is not a story about the judgement

of individuals – it is a story of judgement of the nations – and what is being judged here are the attitudes that either lead to apathy or lead to compassion for the least on a corporate level. Clearly, what MUST be thrown into the eternal fire are the attitudes that devalue those in need among us. That is a deadly attitude. And in our own nation we run the risk of claiming to base our values on Scripture while completely ignoring the call of Scripture.

So what can we do to turn the tide of apathy in our society? We have to start where we always have to start: with our own attitudes, choices, and behaviors. Returning to the king in Jesus' story: what kind of king is this? Recall that in just a few passages before this story, in Matthew 20, Jesus tells us that he has come not to be served but to serve. That is his mission and so that is the mission of those who would try to follow him. And in Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom the following things happen: The hungry are fed. The thirsty are given water. The strangers (those on the margins) are welcomed. The naked are given clothing. The sick are taken care of. Prisoners are visited. In other words- everyone who is poor, hungry, outcast, sick, or despised – are treated with love and dignity in real, tangible ways. That is God's Kingdom: that is a big part of what we pray for whenever we say, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

And here is the kicker: whenever those things occur- whenever the poor are clothed, the hungry are fed, the sick are tended to, and the outcast are welcomed – whenever that happens – whenever the "least of these" as Jesus calls them are cared for – we're not caring for them – we're caring for God. And whenever we don't do that, we're neglecting God. This particular concept was at the heart of Mother Teresa's ministry. Many of her admirers would ask Mo. Teresa, "How can you keep serving the poor, the sick, and the dying with such vigor? What's the secret?" Mother Teresa responded, "Whenever I meet someone in need," she said, "it's really Jesus in his most distressing disguise. It's him I help." We are being invited all the time to see God in others – even in ourselves – even in the most distressing disguises in the people around us...and to treat them as we would treat God.

Author Brandon Vogt writes of an experience that changed him and states, "One muggy Tallahassee day, I was resting at a picnic table when suddenly a strange, disheveled man plopped down right across from me. Without exchanging hello's he stared deep into my eyes and boldly shouted, 'I am Jesus Christ! Your Lord and Savior, who died for your sins!' For a moment I just sat

still. I blinked a few times. I was unsure whether to agree for his sake or run away for mine. But after a few beats, he smiled, chuckled, and confessed, 'Aw, I'm just kiddin' you. The name's Rick!' Did Rick the Christ make me uncomfortable? Oh, more than you know. But he was poor and homeless and hungry and strange which meant he was wearing the precise disguise Mother Teresa always talked about.

Since I wanted to meet Jesus, I pushed forward. I could tell Rick was not just hungry for food but for friendship. So I gave him both. We talked for an hour and shared a couple cheeseburgers. Over the next couple of years I hung out with him many more times and regularly shared McDonald's finest cuisine. As I drove home from that first meeting, though, I wondered whether Rick really thought he was Jesus. I couldn't be absolutely sure. But during the drive, I became convinced that his claims were true whether he believed them or not. If Jesus was right—if Mother Teresa was right—then through Rick I really had encountered God. Not because Rick claimed to be Jesus, but because Jesus claimed to be in him."

My friends, the King we claim to follow says we will see Him in those we least expect. So if we can't see God, if we can't see the image of Christ in the people on the streets- in the homeless, the sick, the outcast, the despised- then we're missing the entire point. Because this King shows up in those folks.

We have a beautiful Christus Rex here at St. James, a carving of Jesus as King – the King we celebrate in our sanctuary is a King that we can know and see most fully in the "least of these." My friends – when we look at this lovely Christus Rex carving -- if we do not see staring right back at us the poor, the hurting, the sick, the outcast, the lonely and the despised- then we're not seeing Jesus. And when we see the poor, the hurting, the sick, the outcast and the despised in our world- if we're not seeing Jesus in them – then we're not seeing Jesus at all. And we are missing out on God's presence in our lives.

Now please don't think I'm giving a glib answer here on how we are to meet the needs of others – sometimes the most important thing we can do is say, "No" to someone. We can say, "No, I can't help you in that way, but what about this way?" As clergy I'm asked to help people all the time and I have to work to discern sometimes, what that help needs to be...it is not usually just cash but if I don't take the time to discern and pray how I can respect the dignity and meet the needs of this person then I am neglecting my call. And I confess,

there are times when I fail to do this- because I'm busy, I'm tired, or I'm feeling cynical. May God forgive me.

But we all share this call together, you and I. Here at St. James we are involved with many important ministries: the homeless meals on Wednesdays in OB, we collect toys, school supplies and baby items for underprivileged military families, we support refugee ministries in our Diocese, we supply food for St. Mark's foodbank, we have a brown bag ministry for the hungry, we support Vida Joven- the orphanage in Tijuana, we host the Interfaith Shelter during the cold weather for homeless in our building, we knit for refugees, we have an incredible health ministries outreach-and the list goes on. Supporting these ministries with our time or donations is fundamental and I want to encourage you to do that if you don't already. And yet – you and I always need to be challenged to return to the basic call of simply seeing God in those we meet –those right here in the pews, those in our neighborhoods and especially in the "least of these."

We say every week that we believe in God – a God who has been revealed to us in Jesus – and who calls us always to an attitude of compassion and to acts of service. If we believe it, we must live it. But remember, as St. Francis said, "It is in giving that we receive."

Amen.