

**Christ the King  
November 23, 2008**

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**Do you remember the old TV show *Hill Street Blues*? Do you remember how the wise, older desk Sargent (played by Phil Esterhaus) used to end each morning call session? As they broke up to go to duty, he would stop everybody in their tracks to say: “Be careful out there!” You never know who you’re going to run into. He knew they needed to beware of the unexpected in their line of work. This liturgy today says the same thing to us; beware of the unexpected, and be careful out there! You may be surprised at who you may meet or at what’s coming down the line.**

**It is the end of another liturgical year. And the church treats us, again, to the very end of Matthew’s gospel, one of the most puzzling and scariest passages in the New Testament—or so I have always thought. It is a profound invitation couched in the language of apocalyptic doom. It is Matthew’s version of Jesus’ own description of the end of time, the Judgment Day. If you don’t think this is scary, you are just not listening. And that could be the most dangerous thing we ever do.**

**The literal minded are doomed to miss the whole point of today’s liturgy. You need to be able to think and feel in images. Matthew is not**

suggesting that there will literally be sheep and goats at some pre-ordained celestial court in the sky at the end of time. He was brighter than that even 2000 years ago. But Matthew is trying to make a very important point: when the Son of Man gathers with all the angels of heaven and sits on his glorious throne with all the nations of the earth assembled before him, this king can look pretty scary.

I know many contemporary people are offended by the image of a King. Kings do not exemplify the kind of power most of us like. And the image is, for some, clearly sexist, patriarchal, and outmoded. (I also feel somewhat set-up by our beloved pastor. He preached to you just last week about allowing the image of God to shift to more “womanish things.” It was, I thought, a very good homily. But then he leaves me preaching this week about one of the most androcentric and patriarchal images of them all. Christ the King! I’ve already lodged my complaints with the boss.)

But if you insist on getting stuck in that *literal* image, my word to you today is: get over it! It doesn’t really matter how much even St. Ignatius loved the medieval image of the king. Times change. Do whatever you have to to “get over it,” so that you don’t miss the really frightening and sobering point of today’s liturgy. It is a completely different kind of king we celebrate.

**It's not the photo on our Bulletin today; nor is it like our beautiful stained-glass window in the back of the church.**

**You and I will die someday. That much I can guarantee. And as that moment approaches, there will be some reckoning—even if just in your own mind and heart. The question today is: would it not be nice to know beforehand what was, what is, really important in life?**

**Then listen carefully to today's readings. They tell us bluntly what is really important to know about life and about death. And the scene is packed with surprises. The final "judgment" is not at all what you think it is!**

**Far too many of us think we know what is finally important. Perhaps it's our wealth or our important friends; perhaps it's our good reputation or our health; perhaps it's being respected, or loved, or valued by others. When God's word is heard today in churches throughout the world, there is a very big surprise in store for us all. None of these is really important. None!**

**The real king's concern at the end of time, indeed this king's passion—and the play on that word passion is deliberate—the king's real *passion* is for all who find themselves, feel themselves, lost. Sound like anyone you might know? Might be you? Sometimes at least?**

**God speaks today, and our strange King also speaks today, through the**

**prophet Ezekial. Listen to this voice: “I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered.” “I myself will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...I will feed my sheep with justice.”**

**This is our king?**

**The strange King speaks also through St. Matthew. “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”**

**Notice as this story unfolds that at the end of time, come Judgment Day, everybody is confused. The sheep don’t know they are sheep; the goats don’t know they are goats. Both the good guys and the bad guys are puzzled and surprised. But the invitation is still so clear: Feed me, clothe me, visit me, care for me. For just as you do it—however unconsciously—to one of the least of these brothers and sisters, you do it for me.**

**In this frankly bizarre kingdom, power is only revealed in gentleness and caring. The naked, the hungry, those in prison, the simply thirsty, the**

**strange and the stranger, the sick and the otherwise just unwelcome—these are the heirs of Christ’s kingdom. This is our king?**

**And St. Paul’s king then takes on cosmic proportions. “For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life....the last enemy to be destroyed is death” itself. With this Pauline king, I always return to one of my favorite quotes from Teilhard de Chardin.**

**“After we have harnessed the energies of the tides, the sun and the moon, and gravitation itself, we will harness for the King the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire.”**

**The kingdom is not what we think it to be. The king is not who we think him to be. The world is not what it appears to be. And our invitation is not often what we imagine it to be. So now you know why I thought of Sargent Esterhaus from *Hill Street Blues*. Just “be careful out there.” You never know who you might run into: hungry or naked, thirsty or in prison. And there’s more at stake than you may realize. Be careful. But also be at Peace in God’s Kingdom, because this is the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of time!**