

# “Shepherds and Salvation” based on Matthew 25:31-46 and Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Today is “Christ the King” Sunday, sometimes called “Reign of Christ Sunday.” It is the last Sunday of the Christian Liturgical year, the completion of the annual cycle of remembrance and growth. Next Sunday we start a new year of remembering and recreating with the beginning of a new Advent. I often skip these texts, and this topic. Most years the hierarchy of monarchy and patriarchy of kingship combined with ridiculously high Christology are enough to turn my stomach. Many years Thanksgiving gives me a way out.

This year I heard the texts and the topic with a different energy. This year I heard them speak about leadership, and I heard them speaking about leadership in a radically different way than it is normally spoken of. As I continued to reflect on the texts, I was reminded that not everyone identifies as a leader, but we all lead. Much of the leadership in human history and even today has been about CONTROL, and about having power OVER other humans. God doesn't call anyone into that sort of leadership. God calls us into relationships with each other, and leadership in that vein is about shared empowerment. That is, I think that there are leadership components in every relationship, even (if I'm honest) the relationship we have with ourselves. That is, within each of us there are various needs, desires, and values vying for control, and some of the work of our lives is to balance each of those so that good is maximized – thus there is leadership within.

Unfortunately, often relationship between people are centered on control, instead of on mutual benefit, listening, and affection. Those relationships reflect a system of broken leadership, utterly unlike the idea of the reign of God – which is also called the kingdom of God.

It seems at times that we don't spend adequate focus on the kingdom of God. You may disagree, and that's OK! However, since the kingdom is mentioned twice in

the Lord's Prayer, and is said to be the ACTUAL messages that Jesus preached in his ministry, I don't think it is possible to focus on it too much.

Together, we spend a few sermons focusing on it in 2014, and I want to bring back some of the ideas we talked about then. They seem really central to our faith, and it has been a while (and not everyone was here then.) Both then, and now, I think this quote from Rev. Dr. John Cobb is the most important thing I can share to bring the idea of the kingdom of God into clarity: “Jesus did not do away with the future tense. We still pray for its coming. Clearly there is no earthly political region (basileia) that realizes this ideal. Nevertheless, what is different in Jesus message is that this ideal is already being realized. He says it is 'at hand.' Even in his lifetime, to follow him was to take part in this new reality. His table fellowship already realized it.”<sup>1</sup> “Jesus understood his message to be the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven understood as a great opportunity or blessing, not as a terrifying judgment. ... 'The kingdom is “at hand.” The requirement for being part of that kingdom is that one change the basic way one thinks and lives. ... Even more important in my view is that a “basileia” need not be hierarchically governed at all. Of course, the “basileia” Jesus proclaimed involved God’s will being done. But when we read the beatitudes, to take but one example, we may be struck by the absence of one saying that those who obey God’s laws are blessed. The first one, for example, says “blessed are the poor in spirit,” and it goes on to say explicitly that “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt.5:3) There is nothing here to indicate that we should understand that the government of the divine “basileia” would be like that of an earthly kingdom, simply with God replacing the earthly ruler. That may have been the theology of the translators of the New Testament, but there is no reason to attribute it to Jesus. Jesus prayed to God as “abba” or “papa.” Papa cares deeply how his children behave but even more for their true happiness. The basileia of abba is not a “kingdom.” I know of no perfect translation, but I am fully convinced that “commonwealth” is better than “kingdom.” One of the ways in which Jesus called people to change their thinking was away from the hierarchical mindset that expresses itself in “kingdom.”<sup>2</sup>

While I REALLY like the idea of the commonwealth of God, or the basileia, I most often use the phrase “kingdom of God.” I use it because it is identifiable as related to the “kingdom of God” and also names a different dream – the dream of the

time when all the world will live in justice and peace because all people will treat each other as kin. If there is any meaning to Christ being KING, it is that this sort of kingdom is what the Body of Christ is working on building.

By the way, this kingdom of God is language from the New Testament, but it isn't something that really started with Jesus. Jesus preaching was continuous with and based on the visions of God from the Hebrew Bible. Rev. Dr. Cobb connects the prophetic tradition with Jesus' kingdom message saying, "Jesus calls us uncompromisingly to enter the prophetic tradition of Israel, the one long-lasting tradition in human history that calls for a reversal of the social, political and economic values that are otherwise universally accepted. True wisdom is not what is taught in universities. True wealth is not material possessions. True power is not the ability to force people to do one's will. Communities based on this deep reversal are "at hand." We can take part in them as a foretaste of God's hope for the whole world. Jesus understood his mission to be to proclaim and realize this possibility."<sup>3</sup>

That all being said, the work of the Body of Christ to build the kingdom may make more sense in the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, as he preached it, "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory."<sup>4</sup>

In their own ways, our texts today also point to the kingdom of God. The Gospel lesson has long annoyed me, mostly because it seems to assume that salvation has to do with afterlife, and I simply don't think that reflects the authentic Jesus. The Jesus Seminar colored this text black (vindication!!), indicating that they

don't think it reflects the actual words or ideas of Jesus, but rather of the early Christian community.

The text is worried about the care of “the least of these” which is part of what the kingdom of God is all about. One scholar points out that of the ways that the sheep and goats were judged, “The first five actions were typical Jewish acts of mercy. (Jews did not use imprisonment as punishment.)”<sup>5</sup> Matthew thought that while those early Christians were waiting for Jesus to come back, they should act in continuity with good living as both Jesus and the Jews had understood it. That scholar connects these commandments even more strongly to the kingdom, saying, “Jesus teaches that God's reign, the full revelation of which we await – is characterized in the present, not by powerful works and miracles, but by deeds of love, mercy, and compassion, especially toward those most in need.”<sup>6</sup>

Our Ezekiel passage understands salvation to be healing for the whole community, not a particular form of afterlife. (Phew) It sees all of us as sheep – some overfed and some underfed- but all the same. This text speaks of a God who wants justice, not punishment. There is a bit of punishment in it, but even within that, God's concern is for caring for the afflicted! This passage comes after an extended metaphor about the leaders of Israel being like bad shepherds who don't care for their sheep. Here, God claims that God will shepherd the people directly, since the human leaders have failed them so badly. Historically, this passage is placed within the exile, and Ezekiel is speaking hope to the people in a time and place when hope itself is a form of resistance!

God wants the people well led, so that justice and love define their lives together. In both the Gospel and in Ezekiel we see the concern God has in how ALL of the people are treated, especially the vulnerable. God wants the people to have good leaders, who care about the vulnerable, who care about the well-being of the whole community, who are using the resources they have for the COMMUNAL well-being instead of just using the power for their own enrichment. The Bible, time and time again, calls on leaders and on the justice system to be FAIR, and JUST, and to make sure the vulnerable have a fair chance. It really is a different idea of what leadership is than I tend to see in the world at large.

We, all of us, are called into the kingdom, which is build on people believing in an alternative set of values – values of cooperation, values of shared joy, values of

hope, a refusal to discount the full humanity of anyone, of peaceful resistance, of trust in God. The kindom one where all the sheep are well-cared for. It requires leadership, and it requires it of all of us. We have to let go of the idea of power over others or control of them, that isn't the way of God. Enforcing our will isn't leadership. Caring about each other's well-being, listening and responding, that's leadership. As Jesus said, the kindom is at hand. We are called to be leaders of the kindom. May we learn the values well, and teach them with our lives. Amen

[1](#) Dr. John Cobb “Fourth Sunday after Epiphany” Process and Faith Lectionary Commentary, accessed on February 1, 2014.

[2](#) Dr. John Cobb “Third Sunday after Epiphany” Process and Faith Lectionary Commentary,  
<http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yeara/2014-01-26/third-sunday-after-epiphany> accessed on January 25, 2014.

[3](#) Dr. John Cobb “Fourth Sunday after Epiphany” Process and Faith Lectionary Commentary,  
<http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yeara/2014-02-02/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany> accessed on February 1, 2014.

[4](#) Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King A Christmas Sermon for Peace on Dec 24, 1967

[5](#) Thomas D. Stegman, SJ “Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 25:31-46” in Feasting on the World Year A Volume 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2011) 335

[6](#) Thomas D. Stegman, SJ, 337

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