



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

Christ the **Center** Sunday

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 22, 2020

The Last Sunday of Pentecost, Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

Right now there is an exhaustion settling over us, and we all know the reasons for it. We're entering the tenth month of a pandemic most of us thought would be over a long time ago. The finish line for this Coronavirus marathon keeps being moved farther and farther from us. We're coming to grips with the new reality, and, as the Thanksgiving holiday approaches, the reality of *not* gathering together in the ways we so cherish is hitting home. I hear about—and I worry about—the isolation and the depression of some members of our congregation, and, in a world without hugs (or even so much as a handshake!), the loss of human touch is no small price being paid.

The Archbishop of Canterbury tweeted this week—I know, some of you didn't know the Archbishop of Canterbury tweets, but he does. He tweeted, "This is harder than the first wave. Let's be calm, compassionate, and courageous." I think he's right, but remaining "calm, compassionate, and courageous" is a tall order in a frightening time.

"Courage" has two primary definitions (according to *Oxford Languages*.) First, courage is "the ability to do something that frightens one." Second, courage is "strength in the face of pain and grief."¹ It appears *both* types of courage are being asked of us in these days.

- It's as if we are standing in a small room where three sticks of dynamite have been lit. First, the Coronavirus, which has already done so much damage, continues to infect more and more people and devastate more and more businesses. Public schools closed again in New York City this week as the infection rates rose, and we cannot begin to imagine another March or April.
- The second burning fuse is the current political theater, which we might observe with greater amusement were it not for the potentially catastrophic consequences. While my confidence grows that a peaceful exchange of power will take place at the Inauguration of our next President, I am less confident about our nation's ability to heal easily (or quickly) from the wounds.
- Oh, and did I happen to mention it? The end is coming. This is the third fuse that is burning, the fuse that is always burning in our lives. The one that we don't pay too much attention to in ordinary time: the end of the world. For Christians, the end is always coming, but on this last

Sunday of the Church Year, we become clearer about its surprising arrival as we hear Jesus speak of The Great Judgement.

So, in the small rooms of our lives, we frantically race from one lit explosive to the next, unable to extinguish any of them and exhausted with worry over which one might explode first. It is, as my father might have gruffly observed, “a hell of a way to live.” No wonder we are so tired.

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical Church Year. “Christ the King Sunday is one of the most recent additions to the Western liturgical calendar. Pope Pius XI instituted it in 1925 when, as Silas Henderson writes, ‘A world that had been ravaged by the First World War... had begun to bow down before the ‘lords’ of exploitative consumerism, nationalism, secularism, and new forms of injustice. Pope Pius envisioned a dominion by a King of Peace who came to reconcile all things, who came not to be served, but to serve.’”ⁱⁱ

It’s a bit of an awkward liturgical celebration in the year 2020 when we find ourselves proclaiming Christ as King, but a king detached from *everything* anyone *ever* associated with a traditional kingship, including royal opulence, pomposity, and the power to oppress. You will note in contemporary liturgical language a movement away from the use of words like “King” and “Lord” because they’re so heavily laden with the baggage of the past. Kings and Lords act imperially, possess great wealth, and stoke the engines of empire. We can seldom imagine them as servant-leaders or as the loving shepherds of gently-tended flocks.

So, what to do with this Christ the King Sunday? How should we approach it in a time when we’re actually desperate for the kind of king the prophet Ezekiel described? A Shepherd-King who promises, “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.” Well, come on! What are you waiting for? Come, Lord Jesus, come!

Ezekiel proclaims all of this will be accomplished through the agency of a personal God who deeply cares for the people of God as God’s intimate possession. Linguists note that, “The immediacy of God’s care is communicated through the repetition of the first-person pronoun. In Hebrew this is frequently the first-person singular verb form:

‘I myself will search for my sheep.

I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them.

I will bring them out from the peoples.’

In other words, this isn’t work that can be outsourced to a lesser power! Over and over again (we are) reminded of the personal involvement of (God) in the life and fortunes of the nation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, where is God in all of this? Ezekiel would tell us, “Right here! Right here!”

The Reverend Libby Howe has an impressive perspective on the concept of Christ the King. She writes, “I have begun to imagine Christ the King Sunday as Christ the Center Sunday.” She argues, “We need language and images that reject hierarchical constructs altogether... while they compel us to a laser focus on Jesus: who he was, what he did, how he lived, how he treated people.”^{iv}

Christ *the Center* Sunday. Interesting. What currently occupies the center of your life? How can we place Christ at the very center of our thoughts, our endeavors, our world? And how can we move out of the center anyone or anything that occupies it other than Christ?

Howe says, “Matthew 25 calls humanity to an ethic of decentering ourselves in the interest of meeting those in need with relief, compassion, comfort, and dignity. Centering and decentering are terms we hear a lot in conversations about power, discrimination, and racism. To be an antiracist in a racist society, it is

the responsibility of those with power and privilege, those who live as the “centered set” of White culture, to practice decentering ourselves every opportunity we have. That sounds a lot like good old-fashioned discipleship. That is a renunciation of sin as it was defined by Augustine and Luther: “to be turned or curved inward on oneself.”^v

We may need to be turned outward.

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” What’s interesting to me is the cluelessness of both the righteous and the unrighteous in this story. It’s as if to say, “Lord, when was it that we saw you? I really don’t recall. I guess I was so absorbed with other things of lesser importance that I must have just missed you.”

The righteous are every bit as clueless. No, they don’t even begin to get it, but because they live lives of responsive kindness and compassion, whenever they encounter the needy, the stranger, the naked, the sick, or the imprisoned, they practice acts of kindness.

Neither the sheep nor the goats recognize, as the Reverend Howe notes, “whenever they encountered the hungry, thirsty, naked stranger, sick and imprisoned, they had, in the flesh, encountered Jesus, the Son of man.”^{vi}

The destination was to be found on the journey. “As (Biblical) Commentators have noted, sickness and disease in the Bible often carries the notion of sin and contagion... and nakedness implies shame and powerlessness. To be deeply involved with such people means to be implicated in their predicament, to be incriminatingly linked to their situation, and no doubt to be guilty by association.”^{vii}

In other words, practicing random acts of kindness might be a very good thing. Indeed it is a very good thing, but much more is being asked of us here. We are being invited to identify with the sick in such a deep way that we are implicated by our relationships with those in need. We are invited to be so close to those in need that we are judged by others every bit as harshly as they are judged.

And there is one more level to explore. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” That great theologian of the third century, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, suggests there is more here than helping “the other.” The Reverend John Sanford, author of *The Kingdom Within*, writes, “Gregory of Nyssa’s reflections make it clear that this passage is also to be taken inwardly. There is a stranger in us, a naked, needy, hungry portion of ourselves, a lost brother (or sister) of our own soul who is also to be reclaimed by being accepted consciously and allowed expression in life. In so doing, we bring Christ into our lives.”^{viii}

Into the very center of our being. And this is the time, my dear friends, at the beginning of a long, hard COVID winter, when we desperately need to care for the naked, needy, hungry portion of ourselves: the lost soul within us, so that we will have the spiritual resources to care for others who may well be facing the greatest challenges of their lives. This, too, is putting Christ into the center of our life.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul, or perhaps a follower of Paul, wrote, “with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which (Christ) has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” The author of those sentences possessed a hope, a powerful, sacred, constant hope, which, I believe, will be a most crucial resource for this next season in our life together. The hope he describes is based on knowing the value of the glorious inheritance among the saints, those who had gone before, many of whom had given their lives

heroically for Christ. People who knew real sacrifice. The hope he describes is based on the immeasurable greatness of God's power, given to those who believe. The hope he describes is the result of having the "eyes of our hearts enlightened."

A little girl came home from school with a drawing she'd made in class. She danced into the kitchen, where her mother was preparing dinner. "Mom, guess what?" she squealed, waving the drawing. Her mother never looked up. "What?" she said, tending to the pots. "Guess what?" the child repeated, waving the drawing. "What?" the mother said, tending to the plates. "Mom, you're not listening." "Sweetie, yes, I am." "MOM," the child said, "You're not listening with your eyes."^{ix}

Can you hear it? Can you see it? *If* we listen to Christ with our ears and our eyes, we will both hear him and see him, and we will find him in the very center of our lives.

AMEN.

ⁱ *Oxford Languages/Oxford English Dictionary/Google Dictionary*, accessed November 1, 2020

ⁱⁱ The Reverend Libby Howe, *The Christian Century*, November 4, 2020, "Reflections on the Lectionary," November 4, 2020. p. 23

ⁱⁱⁱ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, c. 1995, p. 572

^{iv} Op cit. The Reverend Libby Howe, *The Christian Century*, p. 23

^v *Ibid*, p. 23

^{vi} *Ibid*, p. 23

^{vii} Op cit. *Texts for Preaching*, p. 577

^{viii} John A. Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: A Study of the Inner Meanings of Jesus' Sayings*, J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia & New York, c. 1970, p. 183

^{ix} Mitch Albom, *Have A Little Faith: A True Story*, Hyperion/Harper Collins, New York, c. 2009, p. 59

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022