

Matthew 25:31-46

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 22, 2020 – Parkminster United Church

Rev. Heather Power

A new sculpture depicting homelessness in the region was unveiled last weekend in downtown Kitchener. Last Saturday, the KW Homeless Memorial committee showed off the piece, which is made up of a single bronze backpack perched on top of a large stone bench. It's titled "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," and was created with the intention of bringing attention to the plight of people experiencing homelessness throughout the region. Like art so often does, it has provoked a great deal of conversation since its unveiling.

Similarly, in 2013, sculptor Timothy Schmalz unveiled "Homeless Jesus," a bronze sculpture depicting Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench. Schmalz installed the original sculpture at Regis College, at the University of Toronto, and since then, casts have been installed around the world. The sculpture is designed in such a way that Jesus is huddled beneath a blanket, his face and hands obscured. Only the crucifixion wounds on his feet reveal his identity.

As a devout Catholic, Schmalz describes the sculpture as a "visual translation" of our reading for this morning, in which Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, and then tells his followers: "Whatever you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Not surprisingly, reactions to the sculpture vary. Some people find it offensive. Others adore it. Pope Francis has blessed it. People sit and pray beside it. In one city, a woman called the police within minutes of the sculpture's installation, assuming that the figure beneath the blanket was a real homeless person.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. We have come to the end of the Christian calendar on this second last Sunday in November. Next week, with the arrival of the first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new season and a new church year.

This Sunday is known as "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ Sunday" in our liturgical calendar. It functions a bit, if you will, like a liturgical hinge between the long Season After Pentecost, and the beginning of Advent. We pause this week to reflect on the

meaning of Christ's reign over the Church, the world, and our lives. It is a time to wonder: What kind of king is Jesus? What does his rule look and feel like? What does it mean to live and thrive with Jesus as king?

Perhaps some of you are watching *The Crown* on Netflix. I'm quite late to the game watching it and am only on season one. I just watched the episode of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Given the power and pageantry we typically associate with kings and queens, we might expect the lectionary to give us a reading that sounds, well, more royal. Something elegant from the Book of Revelation, perhaps, about Jesus decked out in splendid robes and a jeweled crown. Or at least a more dazzling moment from the Gospels: Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus emerging from the waters of baptism, blessed by the heavens.

But no. The royalty Jesus describes in Matthew's Gospel is very different. It is homeless Jesus. Sick Jesus. Imprisoned Jesus. Hungry Jesus. It is, in the words of Episcopal theologian Fleming Rutledge, the "royalty that stoops."

Reign of Christ Sunday is a fairly recent addition to the Western liturgical calendar. It was instituted by the Pope in 1925, in the hope that a world ravaged by World War I might find in Jesus's humble kingship a needed alternative to empire, nationalism, consumerism, and secularism.

I appreciate this vision, perhaps especially in this time that we are living in. In this time of pandemic, Covid-19 cases are soaring across our province and around the world. Many people scoff at wearing masks and refuse to practice physical distancing. Lockdowns are beginning to happen again. There is a growing frustration and weariness to what we have to give up in order to keep others – and ourselves – safe. These feelings of weariness, frustration, and more are valid – and perhaps this reading even comes off as a bit guilt-inducing. Isn't there enough going on already?!

But what if we reframe this weariness, this grief, this frustration, this reading – as challenging as it may be – as our opportunity to see and tend to Jesus in our most vulnerable neighbours? Is not our sick king even now lying in hospital beds, struggling to breathe? Is not our king hungry, thirsty, and naked after months of COVID-19-induced unemployment? Isn't Jesus even now languishing in prison cells, feeling utterly expendable as the coronavirus rips through jails?

Eschatological texts such as this one, about the end of time are not to be understood as only about something that will happen in the future, they are about what is always happening in the depths of the human spirit today. This text reminds us that our lives are always in some sense, held in divine judgement. "Judgement," as Barbara Browne Taylor writes, "is about being seen through, being seen into and known for who we really are. It's about standing before God without armor or our pretensions, with nothing but our naked hearts and the slim volume of the story of our lives to commend us." The grace of God requires us to live with an abiding sense of the brokenness of ourselves and of this world and a will to do something about it.

Christian vocation is nothing less than aspiring to realize an impossible dream of a world without injustice. An old proverb reminds us, "God has no hands but ours." It is especially important to me today that our response to the world around us encourage us to take an active role in bringing peace and justice to fruition.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian tells us that the life of dialogue, the life of faith, the life in community is a burden, it makes our lives heavy -- heavy with meaning. For those who walk the spiritual path, meaning is created out of a tension between grace and demand, thanksgiving and obligation, divine freedom and divine judgement.

Paradoxically, one of the things that I am most grateful for today is the burden of meaning, the great task of developing compassion towards others – not just those in my family, or circle of friends, or church community – but compassion for all, myself included. In a wonderful book, *On Caring*, Milton Meyerhoff reminds us that we can never be at home in the world by understanding it, controlling it, or owning it. It is only caring that allows us to make a home for our spirit within the chaos of this world. We are being asked to look out for those on the fringes of society. To be deeply involved with the poor, the hungry, the stranger, means that we are intrinsically connected and we are linked to each other in deep and sacred ways. And where is Jesus? Jesus is in the least and the lost and the broken and the wounded – in our brokenness and woundedness. Jesus is in the un-pretty places.

One of the most beautiful traditions we have here at Parkminster is that each week we share together our joys and concerns, those people, places and situations that are on our hearts. I have found that the week ends and begins again for me at this moment in worship. As Joe and I share your words, I feel opened up to your lives, to the world and its pain and exhilaration. I feel held within a community of voices who might have had the same kind of week and the same kind of challenges I've had. I am real in that

moment, deeply connected with this community. In the prayer and silence that follows, I can gather myself together, because I know what is coming next.

In those prayers of the people we mourn and lament but we also hear a deep abiding grace and I am swept away, each Sunday, by the power of it. Do you not also feel its joy? Partly it is the power of the people, mostly; it's the power of God's grace sweeping through this worship – yes even this online space, flowing into our lives and the lives beyond. I am set free to love and set free to live again. It's my own mini-eschatological moment! In it, I know the now and the not-yet the promises of God even as I am fully present to the moment. I know the heart of the Gospel.

Today, I am grateful for a gospel that challenges me. I am grateful to be reminded of our call to care for others deeply and authentically. I am grateful to be called to work to make the world a better place. Peace, justice, love and compassion are not automatically obtained by simply being alive; these are the gifts that can be developed in the light and grace of community. I am also grateful to be a follower of Christ who comes to me every day in the lives and faces of people I know and those I don't know and may never see again. I am grateful for a gospel that stresses the immediacy of the problems of the world and asks us to pay attention - to be the hands and feet of Christ.

Next Sunday we enter into Advent, a season of waiting, longing, and listening. Soon we will walk into the glorious, expectant darkness, waiting for the first cries of a vulnerable baby to redefine kingship, authority, and power forever. But here on this Sunday, we are asked to see Jesus in places we'd rather not look. We are asked to remember that every encounter we have is an actual encounter with Jesus. Perhaps, in this year 2020 – that it is even more profound than ever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.