



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Incognito"**

Comment: *Fr Tyler addresses a popular misconception of the story of the sheep and the goats.*

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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Ezekiel 34:11-17

Epistle 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Gospel Matthew 25:31-46

Times have changed. When as a newly ordained priest I first preached on the occasion of Christ the King Sunday, I used the Shah of Iran as an example of a living monarch. Today, there are even fewer examples I could use of a real-life king or queen to make the theme of this Sunday come alive. The entire royal family of Nepal was slaughtered by one of its members a couple of years ago. This past week, one of the Japanese princesses renounced her royal status to marry a commoner, and the goings-on of several other royal houses have hardly been exemplary to their nations or the world. In our neighborhood, the king of Thailand comes to mind as a ruling monarch that is respected and honored by his people. And thank God the Queen of England still represents dignity, self-sacrifice and majesty in the best sense of the word. But in most cases, the concept of royalty is being pushed ever further into the realm of fiction and fairy-tale, and that makes this Sunday tough to preach about.

We already have a hard enough time dealing with Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah, both of which titles have to be carefully explained to most people. He is already either far too distant from us to be relevant, or else he is seen as a "nice guy" who is buddy enough not to really hold us to any tough rules: more of a

personal consultant than absolute sovereign. That's why a Sunday grandly celebrating, as our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters do, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King" only further serves to consign the head of our religion to the realms of fantasy.

But does that mean that I think that we shouldn't celebrate that theme today? Do I want us to get rid of all anachronistic and outdated language to describe God? Absolutely not- and not just because I am a romantic at heart. That's why I'm glad that the Scripture readings assigned for today do not just deal with thrones and crowns, but with the ultimate issues of faith, accountability, and Christ's authority over us- whatever title we use.

The Gospel today, from Matthew, is not truly a parable but rather an apocalypse: our Lord is telling us the kind of thing that will happen at the end of the world, or in fact any time when we are called upon to declare who we are and what we believe it. His image is that of the shepherd separating sheep from goats. It is an episode is most often misunderstood: in the first place, it's not saying that God thinks that the poor *goats* are necessarily bad- only that the *separation* that will come between the faithful and the faithless will be *just as thorough* as it needed to be for the ancient shepherd who knew that his fluffy *sheep* could handle being outside at night, but the short-haired *goats* could not. But more important is what Jesus tells us about his kingship- that it is a *secret* one, an *undercover* one, and that his followers would have to be ready to recognize him.

In times past, it is said in many world cultures that the best of the rulers who wanted to see how things really were in the kingdom would go out among the people in disguise. [I have learned, for example, that the etiquette of rapping one's fingertips on the table when he receives tea in a Chinese restaurant refers to the secret "kowtow" of the emperor's bodyguards during one such "walkabout."] The principle was that subjects could be observed in a much more honest way if they didn't think that their king was watching.

This, too, is the meaning of today's Gospel. So many people have thought that it speaks in a general way about "doing good" to others, all others, in the hope of being rewarded by the heavenly king. Now being charitable, compassionate and generous is a noble thing and worthy of all Christians to cultivate. But Jesus is *first and foremost* talking about the Christian Church and the need its members have to see Jesus in each other, in disguise as it were, checking up on how we are doing. And please remember that this is Jesus we are talking about, not Santa Claus. The point is that Christians must be conscious of the Lord's presence in everything they do and say because it has both cosmic and also very personal ramifications.

Some might say that this takes the edge off of the teaching: that it is easy to love one's fellow Christian and much harder to love and help those who don't have faith in common with us. I disagree. I have worked for twenty-eight years in professional ministry and have seen some of the cruelest, harshest and most uncharitable behavior exhibited amongst the very people who gather on Sunday to pretend to believe, to pray and to confess their sins. Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about when he says, "...Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are *members of my family*^{*}, you did it to me." That brings it home pretty quick, and it makes the point that if we can't be good to each other as members of the Body of Christ, the Church, then how can we presume to save, or even help the world outside.

That is the kind of king that we hail today, and why I'm not 100% happy with the Catholic title for this feast day. Yes, Jesus is a 'universal' king, and one who we truly believe will come again at the end of the world to establish a reign of such fulfillment and such conformity to the will and the mind of God that even the word "kingdom" doesn't do it justice. But to put Jesus on a throne "up there" somewhere, far away from us and our everyday compromises, rationalizations and cover-ups is to ignore what he tells us in Matthew: that how we love each other here in this family shows best how we honor Christ. And how we dishonor each other here in this family, shows just how much we think we can get away with.

* $\{\clubsuit\} \Pi^{\text{TM}} \Sigma \setminus \clubsuit \} \{ \} \cup$ Literally, "of my brothers".

May Christ our "Stealth" King, when he comes to us in the persons of our brothers and sisters, both in the Church and in the outer world, find us ready and able to recognize both him and a better, more moral idea of a universal kingdom that any we can yet imagine.