

Pentecost Last, Christ King Sunday
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Kingdoms

The world of the taxonomy of living things is divided up into categories, subcategories and super-categories. At the most basic level you have the species. This is your common dog or cat, or the sparrow that is at your birdfeeder. Its scientific name consists of a first name and a last name, and in good Oriental style, the last name comes first. "Spot" the dog, then, belongs to the genus, "Canus," and the species, "domesticus." It means, in translation, dog of the house, or house dog.

Animals that are like dogs, but are not, but are closely related, also belong to the genus, but not the species. The Mexican Gray Wolf, for example, is "Canus," with the dog, but the species name is "lupus." Other animals that are like the species Canus, but are different, have another genus name, like the Red Fox: "Vulpes vulpes," Foxes, wolves and dogs all belong to the family, "Canidae." Canids and other similar animals belong to the Order, "Carnivora," Carnivores all belong with other similar animals to the Class, "Mammalia," All mammals, and other living things with spinal chords belong to the Phylum, "Chordata," and all animals, as opposed to plants, and a few funny in-between life forms belong to the Kingdom, "Animalia."

You see how it works. It's a taxonomy of similarity. Things that are alike are lumped together. Things that are different are separated into different groups. And things that don't fit any neat category just give biologists like my son sleepless nights!

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It used to be that kingdoms of people were similar to biological taxonomy. You read about the Kingdom of the Celts, the Kingdom of the Germans, the Kingdom of the Franks. By and large, if you were a Celt, German or Frank you lived within the borders of the kingdom, but you also looked, talked, ate, and behaved like other Celts, Germans or Franks. If you were not "home" in your own kingdom people still knew where you came from, because you spoke the local language with an accent from home, you always wanted to eat like your own people, and your allegiance was to your own king, people and customs. You "belonged" to a kingdom of people more than a geographic location.

With the demise of these kingdoms and the ease of transportation around the globe, a global economy and a global community, people of many different "kingdoms" now live in the territory of what used to be a relatively homogenous people. We've lost the sense of being part of a "kingdom," in the sense of being like the others in our kingdom.

Instead we have melting pots and mosaics around the world and a new form of allegiance is springing forth, one that is political rather than cultural, geographic rather than racial.

So when we say that Christ is our King, sometimes we're not really sure what we're talking about. In reality, what the Gospel lesson describes today is a taxonomical understanding of King and Kingdom. Like the organization of living things, people whose king is Jesus are similar to one another. We all meet certain criteria, so to speak.

In today's Gospel lesson the King (Jesus) divides the sheep from the goats. And what makes them different is not where they live, or what their passport says, or even what church they belong to. In fact, this story says nothing about beliefs at all. What separates the sheep from the goats is how they live. Sheep live in one way, goats live in another. And what the difference is makes all the difference.

What are these two kingdoms' members like? What are Sheep like? Sheep feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty. Sheep clothe the naked and care for the sick. Sheep visit the prisoner and welcome the stranger. Goats, on the other hand, do not feed the hungry and leave the thirsty to suffer. They turn a lurid eye to the naked and leave the sick to fend for themselves. They blame the prisoner and turn away Christ himself in disguise.

The King looks for actions that reveal the shape of the soul. What you do is who you are. Are you a person of love or are you a person of ego? It is not that the sheep earned salvation through the things that they did. They don't know that what they are doing is true to the heart of the King. They are only being true to the nature of their own deepest and best selves. They aren't even looking for the face of Christ in the suffering. They love because they were loving people, who believe in love, and try to live in it. The King sees the resonance between their hearts and his own heart, and claims them for his own. "Come, you that are blessed by my father..."

The difference between the Sheep and the Goats is whether or not you seek to live in, by and for love. I John 4:8 says, "God is love. He who loves knows God and is born of God." The King is the king of all those who live in, by and for love, and express it self-givingly toward others. This is the taxonomical criterion for this Kingdom.

So what does it mean for us today? If we are really honest about ourselves, if we look deep within and try to see what is there, we have to say that most of us are a mixed bag. We're part sheep and part goat. We're in the daily struggle against the rule of our egos, trying to learn to live in the Spirit, the part of us that knows how to live in God's love. To stand before the throne right now would be rather terrifying, I would think. We don't

even know the truth of ourselves, fully. All we could do is hope.

But this is the blessing of time. The judgment that Jesus describes is at the end of time, when things are what they are. The true nature of each person is revealed. The final statement is made. But time is where things can change. Here is where we move, shift, and choose. Here is where we train our souls to be true to our deepest spiritual calling. Here is where the disciplines of our faith form us into sheep on ever deeper and deeper levels. Thank God for time!

And of course, we don't know how much time we really have—but that doesn't matter. Now is the moment you have. Now is the time and place to set aside the pride of your ego, now is the time to love one another as we have been loved. And every eternal moment of now that we have is a chance to form our souls after the pattern of our King.

Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, each day has enough trouble.” The struggle of this day is to live in love, to live as a sheep, and to follow our King. And in the end, oh, there will be goatiness about us, I'm sure, but if we have surrendered ourselves to the King of love, and sought to live as he lived, then our innermost selves will yearn for love given and received, and we will be loved.

Sunday next is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of the Christ Child. How will you prepare? Perhaps this is a time to rethink Advent preparations. How can you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty? How can you visit the prisoner and welcome the stranger? How can you tend the sick and reach out to the lonely?

One of the first steps is to become aware. In the Bulletin today is a flier about using your smart phone to become aware of your world. I commend it to you. But phones or no phones, the kingdom is the same. It is made up of those who love. This Advent, How will you love as you have been loved?