ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 22, 2026 – CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY / PROPER 29 (YR. A) The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: "*A Kingdom of the Least"*[*]

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24	(The Lord will judge between good and evil people)
Psalm 95:1-7a	(The Lord is a great King above all gods; He is the Lord our Maker)
Ephesians 1:15-23	(God has raised Christ from the dead, and exalted Him above all things)
St. Matthew 25:31-46	(Jesus prophecies judgment on all who neglect the needy)

Here we are, at the last Sunday of the Church year. And hasn't this year flown by? On this occasion, we celebrate Jesus Christ as King of Kings, and the eternal Reign of Christ, both in our lives now, and in the life to come. However, in Jesus' final parable about the Kingdom of God—after eight Sundays of teaching, admonishing, and warning us of what is to come—He paints a picture of His Kingdom without any powerful, majestic, or grandiose trappings. His is a Kingdom of the Least.

In fact, there is something very sad in today's Gospel lesson, something so easy to miss that it escapes most of us. That's probably because it's such a challenging story. Here, Jesus delivers a unique account of the Last Judgment, connecting God's verdict to whether we have actively reached out to those in need, specifically, "the least of these"—people at the bottom of the social and economic heap. He's talking about the most vulnerable, those have no other champions, and no one to care for them. Those were the people Jesus hung out with, and for whom God cares in a special way.

In His parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus makes it painfully clear that those who are condemned at the Judgment are not condemned for doing bad things, or for acting unjustly or cruelly. Instead, they are condemned for the good they *failed to do*. He's telling us that if we sit out the Christian life and turn into moral couch potatoes, we cannot think that by avoiding involvement in the world's troubles, we will avoid judgment. "Hey, I never *intentionally* hurt anyone" won't cut it before the Great Throne of Judgment.

All of this can tempt a preacher to shout, "So get out there and serve Jesus in your neighbor! Do good, and save your soul from the eternal fire of hell!" Which can make for quite a pulpit-pounder. After all, our parish's Outreach Ministry *does* have eternal consequences, as Christ makes clear in today's Gospel.

But let's look at what's so sad in this Bible story. Notice that those who are gathered at the right hand of Our Lord, those called Blessed of the Father, the "sheep" *we* want to be, have only one question for Jesus: "Lord, when?" "When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" "When?" is all they can ask. This is sad because these folks, the "sheep," the saved ones, the good guys, were correct. They *did* all the obedient, sacrificial things. But as they acted generously or kindly, they did not realize they were doing such things for *Jesus.*

Neither the "sheep" *nor* the "goats" recognized Jesus—they *all* said, "When? "When did we see you in need?" But the "goats" neglected to meet that need. For that stinginess and selfishness, for failing give sacrificially in a Christlike way, they forfeited their salvation. Yes, the "sheep" are saved. Yet because they did their good works merely out of *obligation* and overlooked the presence of Christ in those whom they served, they nevertheless missed out on the greatest joy, the spiritual reward, of true kingdom service.

In today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that no matter how good we are, no matter how much we work to meet the needs of others, if we don't actively look for Him in those we serve, then we will fail to see the Lord and to experience His presence. We will miss out on the *joy* in ministering which God intends for us. Saint Mother Teresa understood this in a visceral way. Working among India's destitute, outcast, filthy lepers, she was determined to *see Christ in them*, and to *be Christ to them*. It was the only thing that kept her going—particularly through the bouts of severe depression and despair she experienced.

A few years ago, I read a news story about Trinity Methodist Church in North Wales, England. One Sunday, as worshippers were arriving, they were distressed to see a dirty, drunk, smelly homeless man on the front steps. They didn't realize this bum was actually their Pastor, Derek Rigby, who had disguised himself as a homeless man. To prepare for that morning, Reverend Rigby hadn't shaved that week. He caked dirt on his hands and face and drew on tattoos. He had gone to a thrift shop and bought old clothes and ripped them, rubbed them in dirt and soaked them in beer. To complete his disguise, he donned a scraggly wig, put on thick broken glasses, and hung a half-smoked cigarette from his mouth. Then he slouched on the church steps clutching a can of beer.

That morning, not one of the members of his parish spoke to him or offered him any help. You can imagine their shock when it came time for the service to start. The homeless man walked to the pulpit and took off the wig and glasses. Then he told them what a "stingy lot" they were. He talked about how Jesus said that when we help one of the "least of these" we are helping Jesus. To say the least, it was a disturbing experience for the congregation.[1]

But let's face it, reaching out in love to others, especially to "the least of these" and even, at times, to those closest to us, can frankly, be a pain. It takes time and energy, as well as our resources. And there's almost never any indication of a lasting benefit. What's more, "the least of these" are usually partially responsible for whatever problems caused them to become "the least." And most of the time, they don't look, act, or smell the way we imagine Jesus would. Frequently, they aren't very nice, and worse yet, they seldom seem to appreciate whatever good we do try to do for them.

So, doing good, reaching out to feed, clothe, visit, heal, and otherwise ministering to "the least of these" tends to frustrate us. When we do this solely from a sense of duty—and not for Jesus' sake—we *will* get burned, and eventually feel *burned-out*. The same sort of thing can happen when the people we reach out to are not some distant "them," but are, instead, the people we live with and around, the people closest to us.

One would think that serving Christ should not be as hard, or as disheartening as it often is. After all, cleaning the church kitchen, or anywhere else for that matter, is still cleaning a kitchen. Being nice to a difficult person because you are convinced that Jesus wants you to, is still being nice to a difficult person. Spending time, money, or energy out of Christian conviction means that you still have to do without that same time, money, or energy.[2] So, unless we are doing it <u>for</u> Jesus, <u>with</u> Jesus, and <u>through</u> Jesus, serving others will only be for us, ultimately, unrewarding, do-gooder busywork.

The people in that North Wales parish neglected their *pastor* because they did not recognize him. Do we want to risk ignoring *Jesus* in the least among us, because we are unable or unwilling to see Christ in them? Our Lord calls us to serve Him, and to seek His face in our neighbors, in our brothers and sisters, in the bottom-of-the-heap folks, and—often *the most challenging*—in those closest to us.

That call is real. And there can be no excuses. It is a spiritual call, a call to prayerful discernment, as much as it is a call to action and to service. There's no secret or mysterious way to do this. So, I offer two suggestions: First, in order to see Christ, we have to start looking for Him. We have to truly *look at* the people around us. Deliberately. All the time. We need continuously and purposely to look, as we remember what we are doing (promoting God's Kingdom), why we are doing it (for Jesus and no one else), and what we hope to gain from it (nothing).

Second, if we want Jesus to show Himself to us, it helps to *ask Him* to reveal Himself in those around us. Sometimes we have to ask Him *a lot*. When we reach out to others in a way that is not wrapped in prayer, or we do acts of ministry without consciously, deliberately offering them to God, asking Him to show us how He is in them, our efforts may not be entirely wasted, but we will be spiritually incomplete.

If, in our prayers during the day, and about the day, we fail to beg for a glimpse of His Kingdom in what is going on around us, we are barely skimming the surface of a much deeper, more glorious reality. To make the effort to live the life to which Christ calls us, without centering and grounding it in disciplined reflection, prayer, and Scriptural study, is to risk missing the best part. Which is, the presence of Jesus among us.

It is *He* who transforms mundane service or tedious tasks into opportunities for revelation and joy that can change our obligations into paths that lead to the deeper mystery of the heart of God, and that of our own hearts.

Jesus' account of the Judgment Day that ushers in the Kingdom of God is more than a call to serve others. It is more than a call to be good, and to do the right thing. Of course, it is that. But it is also a call to actively seek the Reign of Christ in and around us, and to devote our days and our lives in searching for the face of God in all whom we meet, and all that we do.[3]

In the Vincentian tradition of Roman Catholicism, the monks' slogan is "See Christ—Be Christ." One of their community members writes that [to] "See the face of Christ, be the face of Christ, distills our … mission with crystal clarity. This is further reinforced by the Preferential Option for the Poor, one of the fundamental principles of Catholic Social Teaching … We touch Christ when we touch the needy. We pray, then, before entering our neighbor's home, that we will see the face of Christ in their faces and that they will feel and experience the love of Christ through our humble and gentle words and actions. … Unless we first come to know that Christ loves us just as we are, and welcome Him to live within us, we cannot [love our neighbors as ourselves]. As St. Vincent explained, "We must endeavor to have God reign sovereignly in us, and then in others."[4]

May the Lord give us the grace to see His face—and may He live in us and reign forever and ever! *Amen.*

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[*] Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 23 November 2014, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.
[1] Adapt. Martin Beckford, "UK Pastor Masquerades as Homeless Man in Front of His Church Before Sunday Service," 11 July 2008. BCN, <http://www.breakingchristiannews.com/articles/display_art.html?ID=5554> 20 November 2017.
[2] Adapt. James Liggett, "Reaching Out to 'the Least of These'", 23 November 2014, Sermons That Work < http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/10/29/christ-the-king-a-2014/> 22 November 2014.
[3] Adapt. Liggett, *op. cit.*
[4] Tim Williams, "The Well: See Christ—Be Christ," 3 June 2026, Vincentian University <https://members.ssvpusa.org/formation/the-well-see-christ-be-christ/> 14 November 2026.