

Opening Music: *What a Friend We Have in Jesus Instrumental*, Music: Charles Crozat Converse, Arranger: Bruce Ley, 2020. OR, instrumental of Crown Him with Many Crowns, or, or, or

Welcome

Peace be with you, and with me also. That is the classic greeting, isn't it? I say, Peace be with you, and you respond, And also with you. I love that simple exchange, so ancient, and grace filled, but modern in a way too, as we are much in need of peace. And it is, in fact, a gift we may offer ourselves, and others.

I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and with my husband Bruce Ley, we serve the Primrose Shelburne Pastoral Charge, consisting of Trinity United Church in Shelburne and Primrose United Church in Primrose, Ontario.

This is the final Sunday in the Christian liturgical season. It is known as Christ the King Sunday. It is a relatively new designation, instituted by the Catholic Church in 1925. The Protestant churches followed suit in the 1970's. This particular celebration was created in the wake of the rising secularism after the first world war. And the rising of communism in Russia that required its adherents to disavow the existence of God and its turning away from Christianity. If you think religion is not political, think again. The 1920's in Western culture will forever be associated with The Great Depression, and after the mayhem that was the first great war, who wouldn't be depressed? The church wanted to draw everyone's attention back to its core, and that was, and is, the figure of Jesus the Christ. If you look at most everything that happens, if you look closely, you will see that somewhere, someone is trying to do something good, though it does not always end up working out as planned.

Much has changed in Canada since 1925 when this feast day was first imagined. That was the year the United Church of Canada was formed on the basic assumption that Canada was and would continue to be, a Christian country. 95 years later we discover that we are living in a country rich in a variety of faiths, which the United Church of Canada celebrates. Our leading seminaries offer courses and degrees in Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Jewish spiritualities, as well as our own. And the fastest growing religious group is the one consisting of those who claim to have no religious affiliation at all. Though I would counter that they doubtless have ways of celebrating their spiritual lives through art, literature, music, and above all, in the book of creation, where we encounter the very essence of God. We can all do that.

So, in the year 2020, where does this leave Christ the King Sunday. King of who? King for what purpose? Other than viewing the Netflix series *The Crown* and *Game of Thrones*, we don't generally think about kings and queens much. What then shall we celebrate? What does Christ

being a king mean to us? Today? In the midst of the ever-worsening pandemic, in the midst of on-going political disruptions – both good and perhaps not so good.

The King of Love our Shepherd is, wrote Henry Williams Baker back in 1868. True 2000 years ago, true today. Love. We shall celebrate love. We shall celebrate our desire to be people of The Way, the original title given to the early Christians. And the way, was the way of love.

The Romans at the time of Jesus' death mocked Jesus as being the King of the Jews. But to those who loved him, he was their king, not by royal proclamation, not by political intrigue, not by winning on the battlefield. They declared him their king, their leader, the one they honoured, because he best knew about the power of love.

So today, on Christ the King Sunday, we take our leader down from any pedestal we may have placed him in our doctrinal fisticuffs with other faiths and invite him to our table in a simple celebration of communion. And we sing very personal love songs, because we chose him as our teacher, our model of how to be in this world. And we follow him, however poorly.

If you don't already have something nearby to eat or drink – does not matter what it is – then find something for our time of communion gathering at Christ's table later in our podcast. Our opening hymn is a mashup of psalm 23, an ancient Irish melody, and its modern interpretation. The King of Love our Shepherd is.

The King of Love, Music, Ancient Irish Melody, Lyrics: Henry Williams Baker (1868), Additional Arrangement/Lyrics: I Am They, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist (adjustments to lyric, Candice Bist)

The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I lack nothing if I'm his,
And he is mine for ever.
He is mine forever.

Where streams of living water flow
My ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow
With food celestial feedeth.
With food celestial feedeth.

Never failing, ruler of my heart,
Everlasting, lover of my soul,

On the mountain high or the valley low
The king of love my shepherd is,
The king of love my shepherd is,

Lost and foolish off I strayed,
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill
With thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross alone to guide me.

Never failing, ruler of my heart,
Everlasting, lover of my soul,
On the mountain high or the valley low
The king of love my shepherd is,
The king of love my shepherd is,

Never failing, ruler of my heart,
Everlasting, lover of my soul,
On the mountain high or the valley low
The king of love my shepherd is,
The king of love my shepherd is,
The king of love my shepherd is,

Call to Worship

I often speak of life as a tapestry, because that is what it seems to me it is – an endlessly unfolding, interwoven panorama of life, the threads of all lives connected in intricate ways. And we experience this idea all the time in our lives. We read something in a book, and then find it repeated in a conversation shortly thereafter, and its imprint trails into our thinking weeks later. Watch for those trails. That is one of the ways the divine voice speaks to us – in those little bits of memory, dialogue, repetition. See it in the obvious ways, and then you will come to see over time, the divine fingerprints on everything you see and touch.

Last week I was at the church and came upon an old picture from when Rev. Besley was the minister – that is quite some time ago. And he was surrounded by twenty-five ladies or so who were clearly the gals running the church. He looked very pleased with himself, I must say. But

one face jumped right out at me as if to say, hello, and it was Ruth Cruickshank, very easy to recognize, and so she was brought to my mind. Then this week as I was trolling my bookshelf, one of the books jumped out to say, me, me, over here – they do that, books, you know, if you look over a bookshelf with no idea what you think you should read, they will tell you – the divine voice at work connecting with you. This book that wanted to be picked out was ‘Celtic Benediction’ by J. Philip Newell – wonderful writer of prayers and all manner of things concerning Celtic Christianity. Phillips lived and worked in the Iona Community for many years, which we spoke about last year, Iona being a thin place in this world, where heaven dips down to earth – yes, right there off the coast of Scotland. So, I was please with this choice, but even more so, when I opened up to discover it had Ruth’s name inside it, written in her handwriting, which I know well. How it arrived in my home bookshelf I have no idea, but I shall return it Ruth this week.

But do you see, how things are always connecting, always drawing us to unity, always interweaving for us, teaching us connectedness, and always with such sweet affection?

So, with gratitude for the ever-present spirit who loves us, for Ruth, who is such a devoted, prayerful Christian, and to Philip Newell who has dedicated his life to serve his faith of birth through the ancient but renewing Celtic tradition, and particularly through the gift of prayer. They all, together, inspire our call to worship and our opening prayer.

Call to worship

Watch in the morning for the light that the darkness cannot overcome
Watch for the fire that was in the beginning
And that burns still in the brilliance of the rising sun
Watch for the glow of life that gleams in the growing earth and glistens in sea and sky.
Watch for the light
In the eyes of every living creature
And in the ever-living flame or your own soul.
If the grace of seeing were ours this day,
We would glimpse the divine in all that lives,
We would glimpse the Christ spirit in all that looks in our direction this day,
We would yearn to embody Christ as our king, allowing him to direct all our ways, all our thoughts, all our actions.
Oh, grant this seeing, this day...
Oh, grant this seeing this day.....

Opening Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Gracious God, we proclaim Jesus our king,
but what poor followers we are,
Forgetting so often that we are to remain humble,
serving others in whatever way we can, and not ourselves.
In claiming Jesus our king, our liege lord,
we are to follow his way of love in all matters.

But so often we choose the path of least resistance
and carry on the way of our choosing,
condemning others, criticizing and judging others,
not leaving room for those who need our care.

We ask of you and this great universe, for courage,
for grace, for patience, as we pick ourselves up once again,
and make our way forward,
trying as best we can, always with you at our side,
to follow the pathway laid before us – one of love, peace, curiosity, and grace.
Steady our hearts.
Ready our hands to care and give and comfort.
Amen.

***Where He Leads Me*, Music/Lyrics: Twyla Paris, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist**

There's a great, broad road, through the meadow,
And many travel there,
But I have a gentle Shepherd,
I would follow anywhere,
Up a narrow path, Through the mountains,
To the valley far below,
To be ever in His presence,
Where He leads me I will go.
Where He leads me I will go.

And there are many wondrous voices,
Day and night they fill the air,

But there is one so small and quiet,
I would know it anywhere,
In the city or in the wilderness,
There's a ringing crystal clear,
And to be ever close beside Him,
When He calls me I will hear.
When He calls me I will hear.

Where He leads me, I will follow,
When He calls me I will hear.
Where He leads me, I will follow,
When He calls me I will hear.
There is a great, broad road to nowhere,
And so many travel there,
But I have a gentle Shepherd,
I would follow anywhere,
Though the journey take me far away,
From the place I call my home,
To be ever in His presence,
Where He leads me I will go.
Where He leads me I will go.
Where He leads me I will go.

Reflection

Last week, you may remember we had read and reflected upon the parable of the talents, three servants receiving different amounts of money to be used to make more money. The third servant received the smallest amount, and fearful to lose it, he buried it. When his master returned, he was angry with the servant for not having been more confident, daring, not taking what he had and using it in the world, and ultimately not making the master wealthier than he already was. He was very harsh with the servant.

I hear every week from my beloved sister-in-law Connie, who listens to our podcasts down in Toronto and loves them. Last week she let me know that she was not at all pleased with the response of the master. She thought his response was lacking in compassion and kindness.

And she was correct, his response was void of mercy. What both Connie and I wanted in the story, was for the master to say to the servant, “My dear one, you must have been so very frightened to have buried the money? Tell, me, what is it you fear? How can I help you relieve

that fear? Shall we work together to overcome this fearfulness? What little adventure can we undertake together to help you work with your own gifts in this world?"

What we want is for the master to be Jesus. But he is not. He is the master – and even in this title, negates the teachings of Christ, who calls us all to be servants. The master is not a follower of the way of love, not a person of the way, not a man of compassionate heart. And that is part of the story.

But I was touched by Connie's response, because it expresses her deeply compassionate, merciful nature, a reflection of her life long Christian faith. So, to Connie, and all others who wished for the master to be less harsh, you may have the same initial response to our parable today, where the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, the later of whom are cast out into the darkness – where presumably they will meet up those who came to the wedding feast not dressed for the occasion, the servant who buried his talent, and those who do not have the faith of the centurion whose servant was ill. When you think about it like that, you can see the cartoon like aspect of the parables, the over-the-top language used to make a point. For you know well, we do not love a god who casts us aside for showing up poorly dressed for a wedding. The masters, the kings in the parables are not God, they are figures of authority used to teach important lessons. And the lessons are always about the state of our hearts.

It is the heart, the heart, the heart, the state of the heart that Jesus is always trying to direct us to. And in order to make the point of how important it is, the language and imagery is often broad, black and white, leaving no room to negotiate your way out of the clear imperative to 'do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly under your God.' So, instruct all the prophets. And Jesus is firmly entrenched in the prophetic tradition.

This parable was chosen as the final lesson in a year of reading through the Gospel of Matthew – next week, we begin with the gospel of Mark. The writer of Matthew chose this parable as the final teaching Jesus gives to his disciples before the passion story begins.

Jesus' final word is a call to compassion – the core of Christianity – or so it should be – and it is our calling. As we read this last week in our practicing compassion gathering, "Infinite compassion holds and heals all wounds." In our individually wounded states, and the world's collected woundedness, the best gift we can offer is compassion.

Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his

right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[a] you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘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?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Reflection

And so, the parable begins with the image of kingship, the son of man sitting on a throne, with all the angels in attendance. It is a pretty picture.

And then the king puts the sheep to one side, those who have cared for the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the poor, the lonely and the estranged. To the sheep he offers the kingdom of heaven.

What is most interesting, is that the sheep did not know that this reward was coming. They did not care for others because they were attempting to win God’s favour. They simply did it because, presumably, that is what the sheep do that are following the Shepherd. Reward is not part of equation. It is not a matter of earning grace. The sheep listen to the shepherd’s voice, and follow his lead. They are not searching past the view of the shepherd to something beyond. They are sampling looking into the face, of the shepherd.

And in doing so, they are already within the kingdom of heaven. They have created it with their own kind heartedness. The blessing they received was already part of who they were from their extended compassion.

The sheep follow the shepherd, mimic his ways, follow his ways, they become an extension of the shepherd. The sheep are Christ's hands and feet and body and mind.

And what of the goats? They too are unaware that in the ignoring of the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the poor, the lonely, and the estranged they have brought upon themselves punishment. But are they not already punished? Just as the sheep are already blessed before the king's command, the goats are already set aside. If they have not extended compassion to others, they cannot have extended it to their own selves. They are already separated from the divine within and with the connecting divinity with others. Theirs is a world of isolation, separation, darkness.

Notice that in the parable, Jesus does not distinguish between the Jews and the Gentiles, those of the Hebrew faith and the Romans. His final word, his distinguishing mark, is compassion, the living out of compassion in one's life – this is how we are marked as his followers.

The Scriptures abound in teachings concerning the importance of living our lives with a focused attention on Christ - seeking only those values that have eternal worth.

“Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” has become a familiar hymn, that has been widely used in Christian circles to challenge believers musically, with the necessity of making Christ the paramount priority in their lives, and then living each day with eternity's values in view. The author and composer of this hymn, Helen H. Lemmel, relates that one day, in 1918, a missionary friend gave her a tract entitled “Focused.” The pamphlet contained these words: “So then, turn your eyes upon Him, look full into His face and you will find that the things of earth will acquire a strange new dimness.”

These words made a deep impression upon Helen. She could not dismiss them from her mind. She recalls this experience following the reading of that tract: “Suddenly, as if commanded to stop and listen, I stood still, and singing in my soul and spirit was the chorus, with not one conscious moment of putting word to word to make rhyme or note to note to make melody. The verses were written the same week, after the usual manner of composition, but none the less dictated by the Holy Spirit.”

<https://womenofchristianity.com/turn-your-eyes-upon-jesus-by-helen-lemmel-hymn-story/>

Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus, Music/Lyrics: Helen Lemmel, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist (note: Adjusted lyrics, Candice Bist)

Oh soul are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?

There's light for a look at the Savior
And life more abundant and free.

Oh, turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

Through death into life everlasting
He passed and we follow Him there
For sin it no longer need bind us
We dwell in his goodness and care.

So turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

He promised his word would not fail us,
And his is a story to tell,
Go out in the world, do not fear it,
Trust him, and all will be well,

Oh, turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace

Communion Service

I invite you into the mystical, and virtual gathering at the communion table.
Here the Great prayer of thanksgiving.....

In the rich dark of winter, God makes an astounding promise: "I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up." (Jeremiah 33:15)

In the wilderness, a voice cries out, longing for the Refiner's fire, repair, and renewal, the promised birth (and rebirth) of hope. Called to bear the weight and fruit of promise, Mary sings ancient trust—the song of generations—that God comes to fill the hungry and lift the humble.

She sings that love and truth will meet, that justice and peace will kiss.

In the midst of uncertainty, Jesus assures his disciples: Just as the tree blooms, so the signs are clear that the kingdom of God is near. In the deep of our own winter, we look for them: bud of hope, branch of peace, sprig of joy, blossom of love.

While around us the snares of fear and conflict lie in wait of infant hope, you, O Wisdom, O Endless Love, O Radiant Dawn, are there, keeping vigil with us, in this season of expectation.

We gather at the mystical table, praying that crooked ways be made straight.

We give thanks for the mystery and wonder revealed that first night, as humble people led by hope gathered in a quiet stable and were witness to your promise reborn.

We give thanks for the blessing and love Jesus shared with all whom he met, in food and story.

We remember that, on the night before he was handed over to die, Jesus broke bread with his friends, blessed it, gave thanks, and said, "Take, eat. This is my body, which I give for you. When you share it, remember me."

We remember that he took the cup and, giving thanks, said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. When you drink it, remember me."

Revealed in stable, cross, and empty tomb, we give thanks, O God, for your limitless love for all. With your people of all times and places, we await with hope the fulfillment of your vision for all creation.

Bless us, O God, and whatever we have now as gifts of nourishment at each of our tables.

Encourage us to share your life and love, which make us, and the gifts we share, truly holy. Transform us, God, and your world, and bless your children: those who feel alone or afraid... those who whose souls and homes are broken by violence... those who will go hungry, thirsty, and cold tonight... those who long only to hear that they are loved... God made known in Jesus Christ, hear our prayer.

We pray these things, trusting in God's faithfulness revealed.

I invite you to take the sacred elements within your own home, as we listen to this meditation on our calling.

***Christ Has No Body Now but Yours*, Music: David Ogden, Lyrics: Theresa of Avila, Artist: Candice Bist, Bruce Ley**

Christ has no body now but yours

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which He sees,

Yours are the feet with which He walks,

Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands.

Closing Prayer

At the communion table, Christ is the host, welcoming all who hunger.

At our tables, may Christ be our guest this day and always, that we might welcome hope, peace, joy, and love into our lives, and become hosts to God's presence and people.

God of Love, guide us to the stables of our world, where the lonely and longing gather.

Lead us to the mangers of our time, where hope and renewal are born again.

Make us heralds of your love and joy.

Hear us now, as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us. . .

Our father who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name,

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our trespass es

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom

The power and the glory,

Forever and Ever, Amen.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, a season of contemplation, reflection, and waiting in anticipation of Emmanuel, God among us.

Be blessed in the week ahead, remembering that you are the hands and feet, the voice and body of Christ, compassion embodied in this world. Be mindful. Be present. The world is waiting for your healing touch.

**Jesus Medley: *What a Friend We Have in Jesus Instrumental*, Music: Charles Crozat Converse, Lyrics: Joseph Scriven, *Jesus Loves Me*, Music: William Bradbury, Lyrics: Anna Warner, David McGuire, *Softly and Tenderly*, Music/Lyrics: Will Lamartine Thompson
Arranger/Artist: Bruce Ley**