In the spirit of confession, I must admit that this day is one of my very favorite Sundays to preach, for today we celebrate the eternal reign of Christ. Instituted by Pope Pius XI in the year of our Lord, 1925, this feast day is a brilliant addition to our liturgical year. Because today, Christ the King Sunday, is the culmination of our church calendar. Next Sunday, the first day of Advent, is the commencement of the next.

Today's celebration was only moved to its current day, the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, in 1970. As you may recall, those days were turbulent. The Vietnam War continued to rage, with protestors out in full force. The civil rights movement was in full swing, as those marginalized in our country fought for equal rights. Assassinations in the 1960s had become far too commonplace, wreaking havoc on our emotions. We struggled to remain a nation united; instead, we were a nation divided. In many respects, we still are.

For so many years, now, every day, in every newspaper, on every news channel, we have read and seen and heard the pain, the hatred, the carnage we so willingly inflict upon one another. We like to think it has only existed the past ten or so years. But if we are honest with ourselves, we have experienced disunity for a very long time. And that is because we have forgotten to whom we belong. Why we have been created. That we are all one family. Instead, we have been bound and determined to be divided. It is all so overwhelming.

Leading us to wonder if God has forsaken us, forever. Or if evil has finally prevailed over goodness. Or, worse yet, if God's power has reached its limit. But it hasn't. And this day—the day we celebrate Jesus as almighty Monarch—we remember and affirm that promise. Even when things seem so very bleak.

Which is why I find it so wonderful, so lovely, that our first reading depicts our Messiah as a Shepherd.

We hear the word "shepherd" and think of pastoral, calm, beautiful settings. Rolling hills of green grass filled with bleating sheep, happily guided by a person with a crook in one hand, and a lamb in another. It is all very bucolic, isn't it?

The reality, however, is that shepherds and sheep are hardy stock who live outdoors, striving every day to find blades of grass and pools of water and places of shelter in rocky, uneven hills. All while wild beasts or ne'er-do-well robbers roam around, able to turn a serene day into one of great chaos and alarm.

Which means, to ensure their flock's health and well-being, shepherds must possess great strength to fend off every threat. And shepherds must possess the emotional wherewithal to assess the herd and separate out the strong from the weak, the vicious from the vulnerable.

It is not an easy life in a world which esteems wealth and privilege. For these sheep herders are merely hired hands, or youngest sons, who dwell at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.
So how did Jesus get lumped into this unlikely lot, particularly when the Jesus we prefer is the far more victorious sovereign Paul writes about in his letter to the church in Ephesus?

The Risen Son who sits at his Father's right hand, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come." (Ephesians 1.21)

Jesus the Christ, with his "immeasurable greatness of power," who is head of the Church, his body, "the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Ephesians 1.19a, 23b)

Isn't Paul's portrayal of Jesus the one we need right now, this very minute?

Well, folks, truth be told, Ruler and Shepherd are not too far apart. Consider the story of David, the least in his family of many brothers, the fiercest in the field while shepherding his flock, the one chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to be king. Consider the twenty-third psalm, when the psalmist reminds us that the shepherd-king leads his flock from danger into security, ensuring our well-being in the process.

And then consider the prophecy of Ezekiel, which reminds the Israelites that their kings are meant to be shepherds, but in their fallen humanity, have failed. It is God alone who is the Good Shepherd, reminding us of Jesus' own words, uttered over six hundred years later, as recorded in the good news of Jesus according to John:

> I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep…I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father…I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. (John 10.11, 14b-15a, 16-17)

Consider anew these words of Jesus, in the gospel of Jesus according to Matthew, which we just heard:

> 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. (Matthew 25.31-33)

Jesus the Great Shepherd gathers the people together, at the risk of his own life, and Christ the King judges them, depending on how well they live with each other. For

nothing gets by the Good Shepherd, our great King. And Ezekiel, speaking for the Lord God, ensures we get the point using a lot of active words.

First, the Lord God will **search** for his sheep, as we are a wandering people. Then, the Lord will **rescue** us from the dark places we have entered. God will then **gather** us together, **feed** us, and give us **rest** in the land of promise. The Lord will **heal** the injured, **strengthen** the depleted, **save** the broken.

But those who have become fat at the expense of the lean will be **judged**. And, ultimately, **destroyed**. They will receive the justice they deserve, from the hands of our merciful and mighty God.

There is more.

In Matthew, Jesus says the Son of Man will judge between sheep and goats, leading us to figure we must be the sheep, while those we don't like too much are the goats. But both Ezekiel and Jesus challenge us to remember that we are all us. Within the one flock, there are the exploited and the exploiters, the ones who belong and the ones who don't. If we are honest about it, we have no idea at all to which side we belong.

And yet, the Lord our King, does. And the Lord our Shepherd is not afraid to judge between us. Feels fearsome. Yet we need not fear, for we know that our Lord is a just and kind God, filled to overflowing with grace and love for God's creation. And we know that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, sits at the right hand of the Father and, as our powerful King, intercedes for us, ensuring we receive mercy.

But that doesn't mean that those who harm another or commit evil in our midst are allowed to continue without repercussion. What it does mean is that God will gather together and elevate the least and the lost, the vulnerable and the powerless, the marginalized and the neglected. God will remove power from the wicked, from those who abuse and harm others. God will heal our divisions, reconcile the flock, restore our sense of community. One with another. All of us with God. It is God's great delight.

Presbyterian pastor and author, Frederick Buechner, who entered into the presence of God a few years ago, describes God's work this way in his great book, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*:

> God is the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep once he finds it again than out of the ninety and nine who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd all turned out to have other things more important to do than come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home a freak show. The man with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner. The old woman in the moth-eaten fur coat who makes her daily rounds of the garbage cans. The old wino with his pint in a brown paper bag…They are seated at the damask-laid table in the great hall. The candles are all lit and the champagne glasses filled. At a sign from the host, the musicians in their gallery strike up "Amazing Grace."

The sweet sound that reminds us of our God who is kind and compassionate and protective and strong and merciful and fierce and everlasting. The sound which promises that all is not lost. That we need not fear. We need never be afraid, ever. Or ever again.

For our Lord is our Shepherd, and Christ our King reigns. The truth remains. All we are asked to do is believe, and follow, and love. And let our merciful Sovereign set things right and restore us to a peaceful place. For we are gathered because God is the shepherd.

Thanks be to God for that eternal truth. Amen.