

Naft + Dot station

**CHRIST THE KING IN DEMOCRATIC AMERICA**  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

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A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson  
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*"God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 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. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Ephesians 1:20-23*

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Today is *Christ the King Sunday*, the last Sunday in the Church Year. As we approach the end of the church year the lectionary readings begin to focus on the long range future, the end of history and the final judgment.

Ask a group of scientists what the long range future holds and some might say the universe will continue to expand forever. The universe will expand and cool down over billions of years and eventually become like very watered down cold chicken soup. Other scientists say the universe will stop expanding and begin to contract. Steven Hawking theorizes in his *Brief History of Time* that if this happens, time would start running in reverse. "People would live their lives backward: they would die before they were born and get younger as the universe contracted." History would be reversed. A fantastic concept. I don't know if the universe will continue to expand or begin to contract but I do believe that in the end our world will be judge by a crucified Palestinian Jew. It's a fantastic claim. But no more fantastic than Hawking's claim.

Our Gospel reading tells us that Christ the King will judge the nations at the end of history. Furthermore, the nations, Jesus says, will be judged on how they ministered to "the least of these who are members of my family." "The least of these" refers not only to members of his church family, but all the little ones who are weak and powerless in this world. "The least of these" reminds me of a phrase my dad used. He use to say, "Vote for the candidate who stands

up for 'the little guy.'" He was right. The nations will be judged by how they treat the little guys. Remember that as we enter a year of presidential candidating.

I can see how that message would lead the Roman Empire to persecute the early Christians. Not because of their religion. There was freedom of religion in the Roman Empire. Read any ancient history and you'll quickly discover that the Roman Empire had no shortage of religions. Boris Pasternak correctly referred to Rome as "a flea market of borrowed gods." There was freedom of religion as long as you recognized the divinity of the emperor. The very idea that the Emperor would be judged by how he treated the little guy was treasonable.

In A.D. 180, seven North African men and women, *little guys*, were brought to trial by the Roman proconsul. Their crime - their failure to recognize the divinity of the Emperor. One Christian assured the proconsul "we pray for the Emperor."

"Yes, but you refuse to worship Caesar as divine."

The Christian continued, "I have't stolen, and if I buy anything, I pay the tax, because I recognize my Lord; the King of kings and Emperor of all peoples." - His answer was very coy. Very ambiguous. Was he referring to the Roman emperor or to Jesus?

"Who do you recognize as your Lord and King and Emperor? Caesar or Christ?"

Finally he confessed. "Christ is our Lord and King and Emperor."

But the proconsul didn't want to condemn these good people. He told them to think about it for 30 days. At the end of 30 days they again refused to confess the divinity of the emperor. They believed the authority of Christ was, in the words of St. Paul, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named."

They were led out to execution. The account of their martyrdom concludes, "All were crowned with martyrdom and *reign* with the Father and Son and Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen."

In 1932 a group calling themselves "German Christians" wrote, "We see in racial distinctions an order of life entrusted to us by God therefore *racial mixing is to be opposed.*" They went on to say, "we demand also the protection of the nation from the *incapable and*

*inferior.*” These sentences were part of a platform of Christians who supported Adolph Hitler and his program of eliminating *the little guys*, Jews, socialists, trade unionists, communists, homosexuals, gypsies and the mentally retarded. In 1934, an opposing group of Christians headed by Karl Barth wrote another confession, *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*. “We reject the false doctrine in prevailing ideological and political convictions.” The Nazis got the point. Christ’s authority far surpasses Hitler’s. Those who signed the confession were considered traitors. Many of them gave their lives because they refused to make their faith in Christ compatible with Nazi ideology.

Years ago I was seeking my first call. A senior pastor interviewed me. During his predecessor’s pastorate the sanctuary had been remodeled. The American flag had been removed from the chancel where it had stood next to symbols pointing to Christ and placed in the narthex. The minister was a loyal, patriotic, American but he was concerned that the symbol of the United States was placed too close to symbols pointing to the divine. A disgruntled member tipped off the local t.v. station. A film crew was smuggled in and televised the chancel without the American flag. “The Presbyterian Church removed the American Flag from the sanctuary.” The following Sunday, during the worship service, the disgruntled member marched down the aisle with the flag and placed it defiantly next to the Pulpit. The congregation was nearly destroyed by the conflict that followed. The pastor was forced to leave. The presbytery stepped in. About a quarter of the members left. The congregation called a new minister. He offered me the position of assistant pastor. “Come and help me put the church back together again?” I said, “No thanks.”

Presbyterians strive to be good citizens. We are Democrats and Republicans and Libertarians and Independents. We vote our convictions and we run for political office. We write letters to commend and encourage our elected representatives. We serve in the armed forces. We stand up and sing the national anthem. We pledge allegiance to the flag. We pray for our elected officials and for the security of our nation. Many of us will gather around the dinner table on Thursday and thank God for our nation. But we confess that the authority of

Christ our King far surpasses the authority of the United States Constitution, the President, Congress, or the Supreme Court.

As the Christian year comes to a conclusion we celebrate a truth which needs to be announced again and again: Christ is King. Our Old Testament and Gospel Lesson are reminders to any who aspire to political office that they're accountable to King Jesus. At his coming their administration will be subject to his judgment. It makes no difference whether they claim to be a Christian or a Jew or a Moslem but how have they treated the little guys? The words of Jesus call all Americans to participate in a political process that will lead our nation and its leaders to stand up for the little guy. Our nation will be judged, not by our gross national product, or the number of stockpiled nuclear weapons, or our military might or any other such thing - but by how we treat the little guys.

And like the nations, we too must stand in fear and trembling before the judgment seat of Christ. But the Judge is the one who submitted to judgment for our sake. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God-in Christ Jesus our Lord. All the sinful failures that cause us shame will perish as through fire, while any good we may have done will be received with gladness by God.

Eternal God, you set Jesus Christ to rule over all things, and made us servants in your kingdom. By your Spirit empower us to love the unloved, and to minister to all in need. Then at the last bring us to your eternal realm where we may worship and adore you and be welcomed into your everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.