Lord, help our indifference.

Today is often called Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, before we start Advent, the season of expectation before Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation. The Sunday previously was given significance, the name was only given in relatively recent times; Pope Pius XI set the Sunday aside in an encyclical in the 1920s. Many of the denominations of mainline Protestant churches share the delineation, although the significance, if not lost all in all, is generally not well understood. (And doing a little research, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sweden has the best name for it as the “Sunday of Doom.” The name is from back when “doom” meant “fate” or simply “the end;” which makes some sense in the naming.)

However, Pope Pius had great intentions by naming this Sunday Christ the King Sunday, as he wrote in his encyclical, "If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God." And so clearly, the intention is not just that we set God in Jesus apart as holy, there is an implication that the reign of Christ has very real implications for the followers of Christ. And THIS is where the lessons come in for today.

In short, our lessons tell us Do not be a goat and Do not be a fat sheep. Trim, athletic sheep are the latest thing— this is to what we should aspire. I say this with some jest, but in some sense I mean it in all seriousness and hope that by saying it, you (and I) will remember once we leave here.

The Old Testament lesson and the Gospel are strikingly similar in their admonitions. The Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel says that the sheep, the followers of God, Israel, are to be saved by their shepherd, but that the sheep who mistreated other sheep are going to be judged. It is not clear what those consequences are, but God does not like it when we mistreat each other.

If you would like to hear a similar message in a slightly a different key, then there is the Gospel.

Christ is Lord, Christ is God, but we are blind, and sometimes we don’t see. There is a common theme between the two groups of people (the sheep and the goats, as it were), which is that neither of them see. In both cases, there is an inability to see. The sheep (who we like to think of as the “good guys”), don’t see or don’t get that when they had seen someone hungry and gave food, or thirsty and gave something to drink or welcomed a stranger or clothed someone naked, or visited someone sick or in prison, that likewise they did this to the Lord. They don’t get that the Lord identifies himself with those who are hungry, thirsty, are strangers, or are naked, sick, or in prison.

And likewise the goats (who we think of as the “bad guys”) they also don’t see or don’t get when they had seen someone hungry and did NOT give food, or thirsty and did not gave something to drink or not welcomed a stranger or not clothed someone naked, or not visited someone sick or in prison, that likewise they did not do this to the Lord. Just like the sheep, the goats also don’t get that the Lord identifies himself with those who are hungry, thirsty, are strangers, or are naked, sick, or in prison.

And so that kind of sums it up: try as we may we generally don’t see Christ in the other. We are told but yet, we just don’t. I suppose it’s part of our problem of being human. It’s like the passage in Hebrews 13:2 “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” But this isn’t just angels, this is Christ, and as much as many of us don’t like the concept of being judged when we haven’t done a crime, we ARE judged. It matters how we treat each other. And even if told, we get stuck and truly don’t know what to do. So, since we can’t see, since we are blind, the only way to see, to get it, is to treat everyone (to include all hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison, etc.) with kindness.

The instruction goes deeper. Doing good can’t be as a reward to get something back… as in, “do this, and you will get into heaven,” Doing right has to become who you are, it has to be your normal operations. And in this sense the reign of Christ is, as Pope Pius stated, that we are to become truly changed by Christ.

It reminds me of a bumper sticker from ages ago, “Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty,” but even more so. Just always be kind. It shouldn’t be random; it should be ever present.

With that, perhaps the reign of Christ, Christ the King, is less about Christ out there some where or up there on a throne and instead more about our formation. Let’s be honest, we each have fat sheep and goats inside us. Bringing the reign of Christ in is not bruising other sheep and not looking down on others, it is addressing our own goats and fatness or our own ugly indifference to the plight of others.

The reign of Christ is anything but indifference, but the reign of Christ is also not indifferent to us. Jesus leans into the human condition and teaches us, coaxes us, models for us, changes us, little by little, to care as much for the poor and the broken as he does. Little by little, if only we consent to it and allow ourselves to change – and Christ will even help us consent! This is the good news of this day: Christ the king reigns over all, including our own resistance and reluctance and inability to recognize him where he is in the world.

Lord, help our indifference.