

- The third reading is from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 25th chapter. 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?" Then the King will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into this 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. This is the word of the Lord.

- Thanks be to God.

- Let us pray. Come, Holy Spirit, with all of thy quickening power. Give us ears to hear and lives that we might obey. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening, amen. Today is the Sunday that the Christian church calls Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday before Advent, the church's New Year. Sunday after Sunday, 52 Sundays a year, we say aloud together in the words of the Apostles' Creed, "From thence he will come to judge the quick and the dead." And again this day in the words of the Nicene Creed, we shall reaffirm our belief that his kingdom will have no end. During the past 51 Sundays, we received the Christ as the child of Bethlehem. We saw the glory of God manifested in the growing boy. We watched the enmity of religious leaders grow more and more intense until they nailed him upon a tree. We exulted in his conquest of death. We received his Spirit at Pentecost, and for months now, we've reviewed his miracles and teachings. Now near the end, we look forward to his coming again. Now on this Christ the King Sunday, he is here to settle accounts. Everything about our worship this day, everything affirms the glory and the majesty of Christ, our music, the Scripture lessons, the creeds, the prayer, all affirm the honor and glory of Christ's name. Again, in a few moments, the choir will reiterate that theme as they joyously proclaim, "The Lord of Hosts, he is the king of glory." In the end, we will sing with uplifted hearts and spirits, "Rejoice, the Lord is king. Your Lord and king adore. Mortals give thanks and sing and triumph evermore." Lift up your hearts.

Lift up your voice, again, I say rejoice. Everything, everything points to the power and majesty of Christ the King, but what a funny king! No purple robes, no crown, no legions of soldiers, no great processions and parades. No castle, no place to live, period. Rather, he claims to be poor and hungry, a stranger and in prison, sick and thirsty. He claims to have nowhere to lay his head. And he says to us, his disciples, "See all these sisters and brothers of mine "who are homeless like me? "They are me, I am them. "To serve me, you must serve them. "When I come back, I will see what you are doing "and whom you serve." the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is the last statement of Christ's parables, three in number. Each parable reveals that it is the good things that we fail to do, not merely the bad things that we finally accomplish, that brings consequences to bear on our eternal life. Interestingly, it is not immorality but indifference that Jesus employs as the great problem. The foolish virgins were indifferent or negligent regarding their need for oil in their lamps. The lazy servant was indifferent and uncaring about making an investment. The goats representing the callous were indifferent about human need, and all of these, all of these, disturbingly, were banished to eternal life without God, not for the presence of some terrible evil but for the absence of some terrible good. Then at the end of the whole Gospel, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Lo, I am with you to the end of the age." But you see the problem, don't you? We think he's not here and that he cannot see what we're doing. But he says he is with us always, even until the end of the age. He already sees us. He knows who we are with and whom we are serving and we cannot expect to wait until the last minute before his coming and then scramble to do the work that we know that he has sent us to do already. We cannot deceive him into thinking that we have been doing it all along because he never left. "I am these people," he says. "The poor you will always have with you. "I am with you 'til the end of the age. "I am the poor, they are always with you. "I am always with you. "I am them, they are me, serve me through them!" The truth is we can scramble and rearrange the words in any way that we wish, but it always comes out the same. It is a description of what life in the kingdom is like, and we are the people of the kingdom. The ministry of laypersons is to represent Christ in his church, to bear witness to him wherever you may be, and according to the gifts given to you to carry out Christ's work of reconciliation in the world and to take your place in the life, worship, and governance of the church. That's what Jesus is talking about. God equips us to do the work that God calls us to do. God gives us gifts. Not all of us have the same gifts, but all of us have gifts important to God. We are not expected to do any more than God has equipped us to do, and of course, we are not expected to do anything less with those gifts that God allows. The life of faith is about working in the world, working for the work of reconciliation, of peace, of justice. When Jesus returns, he will expect to see us carrying out his work, bearing fruit worthy of repentance, reconciling the world, choosing the way of life instead of the way of death, yet often, it seems just too much. There are too many hungry, too many poor, too many lonely people for us to make any difference whatsoever. There is an interesting story told about a scientist, about a writer, Loren Eiseley. Eiseley was in the south of France on the coast attending a scientific symposium. He woke up early one morning and went for a walk on the beach before sunrise. As he moved through the misty dawn, he focused in on a faint, faraway figure. It was a youth, bending and reaching, flinging his arms, seemingly dancing on the beach before sunrise. Eiseley thought, "No doubt he is dancing in celebration "of the new day about to begin." As he came near, he realized that the youth was not dancing at all but rather, he was bending over to sift through the debris left by the night tide, stopping now and then to pick up a starfish, and then standing and heaving it back into the sea. He asked the youth for the purpose of his efforts. "What are you doing?" he asked. "The tide has washed the starfish onto the beach, "and they cannot return to the sea "by themselves," he replied. "When the sun rises, they will die, "and

people will come from town to pick them up "and sell them in the marketplace. "I throw them back into the sea "so that they might live another day." As the youth explained, Eiseley surveyed the vast expanse of beach stretching both directions beyond his sight. Starfish littered the shore in numbers beyond calculation. The youth's plan seemed hopeless, futile. "But there are more starfish on this beach "than you can ever save before the sun comes up. "Surely you cannot expect to make a difference." The youth paused to consider his words. Then he bent down and picked up a starfish, and whirled around and threw it as far as was possible. Turning to the scientist, he said simply, "I made a difference for that one," and kept dancing down the beach. Eiseley went back to his room and to the conference. All of his life, he had understand the coming and going of life to be a part of the way of the universe. Natural selection, he thought. Until seeing the young man on the beach, it had never occurred to him how important it is for one creature to help another and how seemingly, the natural order of things might be dramatically altered by the simple actions of one person. The next morning, Eiseley awoke and again went down to the sea before dawn, but this time, he joined the youth in a dance of life, one starfish at a time. Never before had he felt so alive, so connected to our creator God. Whatever talents each of us has been given, they are more than sufficient for us to do our part in the dance of life. Each simple action of our lives can make a difference in carrying out Jesus' work of reconciliation in the world. To we are called by the name of Christ, love the least among us. If not, be cautioned, if so, be blessed. For it is the choice of caring over indifference that distinguishes greatness from mediocrity. We are the people who carry out the mission of the church, which is the mission of Jesus Christ, our odd, unique king. This is called life in the kingdom. Bending, reaching, flinging our arms one starfish at a time, we bring ourselves closer to others, closer to God, and closer to ourselves. When Christ the King comes to judge both the living and the dead, the question will be, "How have you served the least among us?" Thanks to be God, Amen.