SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 22, 2026 **Festal Eucharist**
The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King 11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Prisca Lee-Pae

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The King Who Dwells Among Us

Today we celebrate Christ the King, the final Sunday of the Church year. We hear of a King who arrives in glory, accompanied by all the angels, and takes his seat upon a glorious throne. He possesses all authority and comes to judge all the nations. And yet, what captures his attention is not the powerful, the successful, or the influential. His concern is for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned—for the least among us.

What is remarkable about this King is that he does not simply show compassion for these people. He identifies himself with them. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." And the reverse is equally true: whatever we fail to do for them, we fail to do for him.

What does it mean to confess such a King as our Lord and God?

We often read this Gospel as a story of two groups: the sheep on the right and the goats on the left, one rewarded and the other condemned. But perhaps we should look beyond this contrast and consider something even more profound: the relationship between the King on the throne and the least among us. Why would the King, the Judge of all creation, choose to identify himself with those who are hungry, vulnerable, forgotten, and imprisoned? What kind of kingdom does this King seek to establish?

The world we inhabit is governed, in many ways, by endless competition. We live in a society that celebrates achievement, rewards success, and often leaves behind those who cannot keep up. We are accustomed to looking toward the center, toward those who possess influence and recognition, hoping that proximity to their success might somehow make us feel successful, too. And perhaps we avoid those considered insignificant because we fear that being associated with them might make us feel insignificant ourselves.

But the kingdom of Christ overturns this order. In this kingdom, the center becomes the periphery, and the periphery becomes the center. The King does not fear being identified with the least, because his greatness does not depend on recognition, power, or status. He is already the greatest. His glory is revealed precisely in his willingness to draw near to those whom the world overlooks.

The prophet Ezekiel gives us another image of this kingdom. God promises to seek out the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak. God does not abandon the vulnerable sheep but goes in search of them. And in the Gospel, Jesus reveals that this is not merely what God does;

this is who God is. God is the shepherd who comes among us and makes the suffering of the least his own.

The letter to the Ephesians reminds us that the power at work in Christ is the very power by which God raised him from the dead and seated him above every authority and dominion. Yet this exalted Christ is also the one who identifies himself with the least. And the Church, as we hear, is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all in all.

What, then, does it mean for us to be the body of Christ?

It means that the Church cannot simply be a place where successful people gather, where those who already belong feel comfortable, or where we measure our worth by our accomplishments. The Church must be a community that reaches beyond its familiar boundaries, lifts up those whom the world considers unimportant, and discovers Christ in those whom others overlook. It must be a community willing to become a friend to the least among us.

To see the face of God in the most insignificant person is, I believe, one of the deepest purposes of our Christian faith. We may not always recognize Christ in those who are hungry, thirsty, estranged, ill, or imprisoned. We may not always know how to respond. But even our desire to see them differently, to approach them with kindness, and to recognize their dignity is a beginning. The love of Christ invites us to keep learning how to see.

And perhaps this is something we must remember not only as individuals but also as a community of faith: every human life possesses immeasurable dignity, and within each of us is a capacity for love that is waiting to be awakened.

Just as everything that has a beginning must also have an end, today marks the end of my ministry at St. Thomas. As I have been tidying up my desk drawers and cabinets over the past few weeks, I came across a surprisingly large number of face masks. They brought back memories of when I first began my ministry here. The pandemic was still ongoing, and I would meet you and lead worship with half of my face covered by a mask. Five years have passed since then. We have grown accustomed to worshiping and living without masks, and now that same passage of time has brought me to the moment of saying goodbye.

Five years is by no means a short time. St. Thomas is my first parish as a priest, and it will always hold a special place in my heart. It is, in a way, my first love. Leaving one's first love is never easy, nor is it easy to forget. I have learned so much here, not only about ministry and the Church, but also about what it means to love and to be loved as a priest and as a member of a community.

When I first came here, so much was unfamiliar. As a woman priest, and as a priest who did not fit what some might have imagined a priest to be, I had much to learn and many boundaries to cross. Together, we have experienced challenges, changes, and unexpected joys. We have prayed, worshiped, gathered, and shared our lives. There were things I could have done better, and there are certainly things I wish I had known how to do differently. If my sometimes clumsy attempts to love or serve have hurt anyone, I ask for your generous forgiveness.

But I also leave with deep gratitude for the many ways you have welcomed me, encouraged me, challenged me, and allowed me to grow. I will miss you, and I will remember you for a long time.

There is something I have often wondered about: Could it be that we live immersed in the overflowing love of God, much like fish swimming in the sea, and yet we still find ourselves parched, thirsting for that very love? Could it be that we have been given the freedom to soar like birds, and yet we remain huddled together, struggling to breathe, unable to experience the fullness of that love?

The love of Christ is neither limited nor conditional. It is not confined by the boundaries we humans create. We owe our very existence to this love. And this life has been given to us as an opportunity to discover it, receive it, and share it with one another.

This is the power of God that the letter to the Ephesians speaks of today: the power at work in Christ, the power that raised him from the dead, and the power that continues to work among those who believe. It is not simply a power that gives us strength to succeed or to overcome difficulties. It is the power of love that enables us to see differently, to reach beyond ourselves, and to recognize Christ in one another.

As I leave St. Thomas, I hope you will continue to discover this love in your life together. Do not allow yourselves to become so occupied with maintaining what you have that you forget those who are still waiting to be welcomed. Do not become so comfortable at the center that you lose sight of those at the margins. And do not underestimate the quiet, often unseen ways in which God's love is already at work among you.

The Church year ends today, but the reign of Christ has no end. And the love of Christ does not end with a farewell, a change of place, or the closing of one chapter of ministry. We remain connected in the Body of Christ, wherever we may go.

May you continue to recognize your King—not only upon the glorious throne, but also in the faces of those who need your compassion, friendship, and love.

For wherever that love is shared, Christ the King is already there, dwelling among us.

The Rev. Juyoung Prisca Lee-Pae

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