

I sort of feel badly about our hymns today, not that there is anything not to like about them, and they clearly fit into what this day is — “Christ the King” day, — but with Thursday’s being Thanksgiving, and my loving three Thanksgiving songs very much, well, everyone is invited to Wednesday evening when we shall sing them.

“Christ the King” Sunday is the last Sunday of the *Church* year; next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of a new *Church* year. Being a somewhat compromising yet aspiring purist who does not want to run afoul of the liturgical police, we won’t sing Christmas carols *as part of Advent worship* — but we shall sing a verse or two of some carols each week just *before* we begin worship, and next week we shall sing verses from my favorite carol, “In the Bleak Midwinter.” I think everyone knows it by now, but it has really become popular, I would surmise, just in the past thirty to forty years or so, though both the tune and the lyrics — from a poem by Christina Rossetti (sister of the perhaps better known, Dante Gabriel Rossetti) — are much older.

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone . . .”*

One of the verses begins

*“What can I give him, poor as I am,
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part . . .”* and so on.

And today, when we celebrate “Christ the King,” that is a question we need answer yet again, “What can I,” indeed, “What should I,” not so much *give* as “bring before him,” “set before him,” for we are all servants of the King.

I have no reason why the old — and it might be ancient, it’s hard to know for sure — nursery rhyme, “Sing a song of sixpence” came to mind. Well, I do; it is probably obvious, but it is sort of silly:

*Sing a song of sixpence, A pocket full of rye.
Four and twenty blackbirds, Baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing;
Wasn't that a dainty dish, To set before the king?*

Wasn't that a dainty dish, To set before the king? Because of the age of this rhyme, it isn't clear what *dainty* means, but is a *dainty* dish all we set before the King? Is it the measure of what we bring to the one who was nailed to the cross on our behalves?

It is the *Church* year we are ending, but the question of what we set before the King is both a collective — that is, for us as church — and a personal question.

Smaller churches, which we clearly are, tend to be preoccupied with surviving, often at the expense of any and all other concerns, but is surviving setting *anything* before the King, before the Lord? Surviving as a church seems to me to be more about self-interest, comfort, familiarity and security than about setting anything before the Lord.

Oh, we are not completely self-serving by any means. [Clothing ministry and hygiene, Thanksgiving and Christmas boxes] We give a small part of our budget to mission, but well short of “tithing,” and alas, the limit of our Evangelism [we do, largely through the efforts of ShaRon and Gary Liedl but with others' help, present the Live Nativity, and we do participate in the Home Tour] is greeting visitors who come through our doors. But is that enough to “set before the King?” Seems *dainty* does it not, especially in light of these words that Jesus voices in the next Church year's Lectionary Gospel, Matthew:

³¹ "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. ³² 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, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ 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; ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.' ³⁷ 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? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer 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.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, . . . for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.' ⁴⁴ 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?' ⁴⁵ 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.'"¹

And some verses later, in a post-resurrection appearance, Jesus says quite explicitly:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all [peoples], baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”²

The capital “C” Church, we as a small “c” church, are called *to set before the Lord* that kind of service, and I do not think it can be called “*dainty*.” And not that

¹ Matthew 25:31-45 (NRSV)

² Matthew 28:19-20a (NRSV)

we should not gather in worship and fellowship, but notice that serving our own needs and comfort are not within either of the charges Jesus gives.

Which presents the question, “What about us as *individual* Christians?” Certainly as individual Christians who are also members of a church, we are called to look not to our own comfort and pleasure, but to whether the church is following those charges Jesus set down; *mission* and *evangelism* are not options, they are commands.

So one thing we are indeed called upon to do is to insist that our church be what Christ calls the Church to be; we need to set *that* before the King.

But I have some problem with the word, *commands*, not because Jesus the King cannot command, but rather that we should not need a *command* to move us as either churches or individuals to follow where the King would lead us; as I say frequently to the consternation of Laura Hoffman, I do not preach about not sinning — I mean, I do not disagree that we should not, it just tends not to be the subject of my sermons — I do not preach about not sinning in order to avoid hell, both because I do not believe in a literal hell, and because I believe that when we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, as “King,” we intrinsically try to avoid sinning, not because we are afraid of hell, but because we want to *follow* Him, because we are grateful for what God has done for us through Him, and because we want to please God.

And that is what I believe we Christians are called to lay before the King, to set, before the King: behavior that pleases God. On Christmas Eve, we shall undoubtedly read again from the prophet Micah the words that prophecy the significance of Bethlehem, but that short book also contains these incredible words:

“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of

oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God?³

Or to answer the question we left unanswered in Christina Rossetti's, "*What can I give him?*" As she goes on to say and as we shall one day sing, "*What I can I give him, Give my heart.*" Give our individual hearts, and give the collective spirit that makes us want truly to be the individuals and the Church -- both capital "C" and small "c" -- not that we want to be, but that *He* wants us to be.

That is assuredly *not a dainty dish* to set before our King.

And in his name. Amen.

³ Micah 6:6-8 (NRSV)