

Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe

Some of my Jewish friends have shared with me the anguish they feel over the attacks by Hamas and the retaliation by Israel. The second release of hostages and the continued silencing of weapons of war have brought some relief, but tensions remain high in a struggle of life and death. What authority can stop an enemy who seeks the end of life for you, your family, friends and fellow believers? Who ultimately judges right from wrong? Who punishes and saves?

Bishop David J. Malloy, the chair of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace has said, "The October 7 terrorist attacks of Hamas which initiated this war must be condemned. We renew the call for the release of hostages and protection of civilian populations. At the same time, we affirm continued efforts to allow humanitarian access, including corridors for those seeking safety, and urge Congress to provide support for relief efforts. As Pope Francis reminds the world, 'War is always a defeat; it is a destruction of human fraternity.'"

More than ever this year, this month, this week, today, we need Jesus Christ, the Universal King. He rules the world. We subject ourselves to him, entrusting all justice to his mighty power. Today we celebrate Christ the King.

Our series of Sunday readings from Matthew's gospel this year comes to a close with the familiar yet ever-discomfiting parable of the separation of sheep from goats, those who perform works of mercy from those who do not. To prepare for it, we hear from Ezekiel that God promises to be a shepherd who will tend his flock but then ultimately "judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats." God alone punishes and saves.

The lectionary wraps up the church year for us with the ever-popular Psalm 23, which bestows comfort in declaring the Lord is one's shepherd; for us, Christ is our king. One of the enduring images of this psalm is the implement the shepherd carries. Our cantor sang to God for us, "Your crook and your staff will give me comfort." Here the crook or staff means the walking stick that the shepherd holds in his hand. However, the same word appears elsewhere in the bible to mean a weapon and a scepter. As a weapon, Joab thrust three of them attempting to puncture the heart of David's helpless son Absalom. A scepter is the sign of royal leadership, as the Book of Genesis says, "The scepter shall never depart from Judah," a passage we hear during Advent, foretelling the coming of the Messiah. At Christmas we'll hear another prophecy from Isaiah, the one that says, "a child is born to us, a son is given to us." That prophecy also praises God for salvation with this image about the end of the people's suffering: "The rod of their taskmaster, you have smashed."

The shepherd's crook is a walking stick, a guiding hand, and a weapon to provide protection. In the hand of Christ, it is the royal scepter of justice and peace. He will judge those who do wrong. He favors those who do right. When we examine our consciences, we may find ways we have harbored prejudices toward others, excluded others, harmed others, withheld help from others. We will contribute to a more peaceful and just world if we subject ourselves in humble service to the crook and staff of our shepherd, Christ the King.