



*Longing for  
the Light*

WAITING FOR GOD  
TO ARRIVE AT ADVENT

# CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

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*READING: PSALM 95:1-7; EZEKIEL 34:11-24; MATTHEW 25:31-36*

**H**ave you ever seen a Kingfisher fly? It dances around, above the water, and always seems to be a bit beyond you. The flight of the kingfisher points us to the all-encompassing beauty of a life lived fully in concert with Emmanuel, God with us, as we too are invited to play like this, to dance like this before our God, our creator, as an act of worship. This dancing and playing are foundational for Gerard Manley Hopkins in his sonnet *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*. Hopkins wrestles with the age-old question we all face in some way or another, does life have purpose and meaning? But he does this from a theological perspective. He asks does humanity have an end or *telos*, the destination for which our life's journey course has been set, like the dancing kingfisher or dragonfly.

Eugene Peterson draws upon this image of the dancing Kingfisher, set afire by the light of the sun as it goes about its normal action of living, when he sets off on his series about *Spiritual Theology*. Peterson is asking similar questions as Hopkins did, since they both want us to know what a good life looks like and by what is it shaped. Peterson summarizes Hopkins's conviction "that it is Christ, the God-revealing Christ, who is behind and in all of this living." And then invites us to experience "The vigor and spontaneity, the God-revealing Christ getting us and everything around us in on it, the playful freedom and exuberance, the total rendering of our lives as play, as worship before God." As we come to the end of the Christian year, and once again start a new one, I want this focus on the *telos* of the human life to be at forefront of our minds as we reflect on the season that starts with Christ the King Sunday, moves through Advent and culminates with Christmas.

It is not a coincidence that the Kingfisher has featured so prominently in my introduction. First, it is one of my most favourite birds, although I do have a lot of favourite birds, albeit one which I find the most frustrating. One of the aspects that makes them so beautiful is also something that makes them a challenge to watch or photograph in close proximity. They dance back and forth and can be easily startled and will seemingly give you a talking-to when they dart to a more distant tree just as you made your way near them. Numerous times I have spotted a Kingfisher and, after slowly making my way near it, see it fly to where I had previously been. As I start to return, it too had gone back from where it came. I have learned that it is best to find a

spot where a Kingfisher may choose to perch and just sit there and wait in hopes that one will decide to stop by. Then, you can watch and get a few photos before he or she decides to move on. As it whizzes away, it is an absolute joy to watch. It is majestic in flight and looks regal perched over the water with its crest fully displayed. I cannot find any evidence that this led to the name of this bird, nor can I really find any method behind why it is called the Kingfisher at all. It is said to have previously been called the King's Fisher and had been an icon of royalty, specifically Wenceslaus IV and his Bible. Thus it may be an apt image for Christ the King Sunday. The final Sunday of the liturgical year, the last one before Advent and the start of the Christian New Year is a Sunday to commemorate that Jesus is King over all. As the year ends and a new one begins we are reminded of who is really in control, who really reigns, and what really matters.

### **WHAT IS A KING?**

King, Kingship, and Reign are often loaded words, ones we have to define in order to ensure we are saying the same thing. There are many understandings for what a king is, even when talking about what kind of King Jesus is. Our view of what a king is can be shaped by pop culture and the royal figures presented to us in Game of Thrones, The Last Kingdom, or various other books and films. Even the idealized royal figures of Disney can have an impact on our thinking. Intentionally or not we pick a King, Queen, or military leader and interpret all others from them. Some of these examples might be more harmful than others, like how common Scottish independence leader William Wallace is programmatic for the modern evangelical church's understanding of leadership. My primary point of reference for kingship is Alfred the Great, or at least how he is presented in the Last Kingdom Series. He is a pious intellectual with an ability to act strongly and decisively as necessary. But regardless of who influences us, they do and can cloud our understanding of Jesus and his kingship.

### **WHAT DOES HIS KINGSHIP LOOK LIKE?**

The image of the Shepherd is common and often connected with God and his anointed leader. Like the language of kingship, it can be a loaded word as well. This Week's Readings draw a connection between King and Shepherd.

Psalm 95 reminds us "the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods" and then extols us to "kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." Yahweh is a great God, a great king, and a great shepherd.

Ezekiel 34 offers a critique of the leaders of Israel who were supposed to act as shepherds and offer care and protection to God's sheep but instead merely looked after themselves. The result was wandering and scattered sheep. In response Yahweh will search, seek, and rescue these sheep, saying "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." It is a commitment to care, to look after, and to defend and protect the shepherd's sheep. Yahweh will save them and protect them from being ravaged and will judge between sheep. But this is with a specific promise "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken."

This threat and promise of justice are evident in the Gospel text as well. In the Sheep and the Goats passage from Matthew 25, Jesus presents a similar judgment where the shepherd judges between those found faithful and those found unfaithful. It is a complex and multifaceted passage but at its heart is about treating 'the least of these' with true humanity and proper care. The sheep offer food, water, clothing, hospitality to people and by extension offer it to Jesus while the goats do not. The sheep will experience blessing while the goats will experience a curse.

### **THE SHEPHERD-KING**

These three passages show different but related aspects of what kingship, or the Shepherd King, looks like. The right to judge and rule but also the more intimate care and protection. It is the prerogative of the king to offer a ruling from the throne and to decide what is just, fair and right.

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Sometimes I think we overemphasize one aspect of the shepherd-king over the others. We can focus too much on care without taking seriously the role of protector. Or we can focus too much on protector without recognizing the importance of ruler and judge. Or, an aspect even more relevant at present, we focus too much on ruler without taking into account the need to offer intimate care. But these all must work in concert and be understood complementary or we will get ourselves in a muddle. This is all the more important when we look to Jesus as Shepherd-King. When our

understandings of his character and attributes are out of proportion, it can have a devastating effect on our spiritual lives. It is absolutely necessary for our understandings of Jesus as shepherd-king to be as robust and multifaceted as the biblical text permits. And that is what our readings have offered to us. So what kind of King? A Shepherd-King. One who rules justly, One who cares for those under his care who are weak and abused more than those who are in power. One who offers the necessities of life and one who offers true intimacy.

As this year ends and the new one opens, Christ the King Sunday offers an opportunity to reset, refocus, and reflect on the world we live in and our place in it. The place where we can dance like the Kingfisher.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Who or what are my biggest influences when I think about Kingship? In what ways do they accurately reflect Jesus as Shepherd-King and in what ways do they fall short?

What makes you feel free to dance before your creator like the Kingfisher? What hinders you from dancing? Where in your life can you cultivate more freedom to dance?