Whenever we approach this celebration of Christ the King, I’m struck by the irony of a feast established to cement the relationship of the institutional church and an oppressive secular authority, but celebrating a very different kind of rule. The festival originated in a somewhat disquieting pact between Pius XI and the emerging fascist government... but survived because it points to a greater reality. So today we contemplate afresh what it means to live in Christ’s kingdom—a kingdom “not of this world” but whose citizens are called to its way of living very much in the here and now. And we’ve two pieces of prophecy to help us....

In ancient Israel, the language of sheep and shepherd was often applied to kingship. Ezekiel underlines this as he proclaims God’s promise to search for the wounded and the straggler in a reunited kingdom—as much as to judge between sheep and sheep. You see, even when following their shepherd, it seems that some sheep just don’t care whom they hurt in their search for good pasture... and then the shepherd changes from gentle leader to agent of judgement... who will “feed them with justice”. He can do this because he recognises their motivation for what it is, and is alert to every nuance of their behaviour. This shepherd knows his flock alright—good sheep, bad sheep and goats as well.

But surely there’s no real challenge to sorting out sheep from goats. Indeed, when you think in terms of the sheep and goats we know from our own farming landscape, there’s no room for confusion. It would be a very dim shepherd indeed who couldn’t tell them apart. Sheep are sheep and goats, well goats are different. You can tell by them by the beards, the horns, and the smell. Can’t you? Well, not so much in southern Europe or Asia, where floppy ears and wicked yellow eyes seem common to both groups...

Unless you spend a lot of time with them, it would be hard to tell the difference. And that, I think, is the point. According to an article in the Jewish Heritage magazine, though both sheep and goats could be used in Temple sacrifice, goats were seen as "armed robbers who would jump over people’s fences and destroy their plants." While sheep graze at a fairly consistent ground level, goats not only graze at the ground but can also tear leaves, buds, fruit off trees, and notoriously, washing off lines, and are thus far more destructive. But you wouldn’t know that unless you got close to them, - close enough to see how they behaved.

And that’s the crux of the story, isn’t it?

How they behave, How we behave.
Are we sheep, or are we goats?
What do you think?

The American spiritual director and author Dennis Linn was speaking to a group of elderly nuns, and asked "How many of you, even once in your life, have done what Jesus asks and fed a hungry person, clothed a naked person or visited a person in prison?" All the sisters raised their hands.

Dennis said, "That's wonderful! You’re all sheep."
Then Dennis asked, "How many of you, even once in your life, have walked by a hungry person, failed to clothe a naked person, or not visited someone in prison?" Slowly, all the sisters raised their hands. Dennis said,"That's too bad. You're all goats."
The sisters looked worried and perplexed. Then suddenly one very old sister’s hand shot up. She blurted out, "I get it! We're all good goats!"

A contradiction in terms, or an accurate reflection of the reality of life? I’m not going to make us all thoroughly uncomfortable by repeating the questions here – but it’s fair to say that in my experience very few of us are wholly good or wholly bad. As we strive to follow in the steps of Christ we can become more conscious of our own failures,
so that sheep are more aware of the times when they behave like goats., and as Paul reminds us, “all fall short”...but there are times when we get things quite wonderfully right as well.

So perhaps what divides sheep and goats is not so much behaviour as motivation...They may set out to follow the same shepherd, but what happens along the way? What's behind their behaviour?
It all comes down to the kind of King we're following.

If you've a few spare moments when you get home, ask google images to show you some suggestions for “Christ the King”. There's quite a range, -Ultra pious, rather saccharine depictions of the Infant of Prague, unexpected links to church buildings and a whole galaxy of icons, from across the Orthodox Tradition. Most feature a predictably regal Christ - crowned, on the throne, and often bearing orb and sceptre. This is the king beloved of hymnody, the king "all glorious above"whom we'll be singing of through Advent...but I'm not sure that this is the king of today's gospel.
Oh yes, he's present at the start of the reading
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.
This is the court of judgement ...the place where we will hear our final destiny...Tremble in awe
But if we aspire to belong to the kingdom right now, then there are more important truths for us to hear today, more important even than the verdict on our lives...
To live in a kingdom is about far more than standing to wonder at the majesty of the king at his final grand entrance...and we may be in real danger of missing the essence of both kingdom and king if we focus too much on the set-piece, deus ex machina moments that will complete our personal drama.
We should not be driven, not even for a moment, by fear.
Our King is rather different.

If we want to live in the kingdom, then Christ the king is the one who sets the standards, who shows us what kingdom life will be like.
Christ, who chooses to spend his time with the marginalised, the oppressed, the forgotten.
Christ who is utterly committed to those whom nobody values, nobody respects,
Christ who identifies himself só completely with “the least of these”that when we look at them, we know we are seeing him too.
The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner...
People who NEED us, who need very specific care – not just a generalised expression of good will...
People we probably won't be at ease with, people who may demand things that we find it very hard to deliver.
People we might not like, but are called to love.
People in whose faces we should expect to see the face of Christ.

Thomas Merton observed that the kingdom of God is not one that preaches a particular doctrine or follows certain religious practices, it is the kingdom of those who love. That's what lies at the heart of our parable – and at the heart of the kingdom. The great commandments of Love.

To love our King is to love what he has made...children, men and women, joyous,broken, hopeful or despairing...
To love our neighbours is to love the One in whose image they,we, are made...and to recognise the divine image not on stamps or coins but in their faces, wherever we encounter them.

That's what it means to be true to the kingdom...to love, and love again.
The DNA of King and kingdom are one...so that Bonhoeffer’s question
'how may Christ take form among us today & here?' is both a mystery to be solved – as we look for Christ among those whom we encounter –and a challenge to be embraced as we consider how we can BE Christ...
Two sides of one coin,
We may not realise, in our active loving, that we are serving Christ –and só the parable offers a wonderful surprise for those who didn't recognise that in loving service of the outcast they were offering loving service to the king...
But those with ears to hear are given insider knowledge in this parable, that if we want to serve the king we will inevitably HAVE to offer loving service to the outcast.

You see, there is, in essence, just one commandment, the commandment of love, and real love is always manifested in action. And, when it comes down to it, it is living lives of love that will build the kingdom of God here on earth. We aren't asked to decide who might be sheep or goats...all we are asked to do is to carry on loving – wildly, indiscriminately, just as Christ our King does.