

Christ the King Sunday
November 23, 2014
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Kings and Shepherds

Today is the last Sunday of the church year; next Sunday, we'll begin the season of Advent that leads us to Christmas. Today is celebrated as the Feast of Christ the King—you notice we're using white (red?) vestments and paraments. When I see those beautiful fabrics each week, and the burnished brass, and the ornate silver chalice, I usually feel a deep surge of satisfaction, an abiding love for our solemn liturgy, the centuries of history it represents, the way it connects us to the early church.

Um, in this case, not so much. Christ the King Sunday was added to the Western Christian calendar in 1925, less than a century ago. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI and adopted by Anglicans, Lutherans, and many other Protestant denominations in 1970, when we also adopted the Revised Common Lectionary that we still share. For us, this feast day officially remains optional; it doesn't appear on the Episcopal calendar of feasts and saints' days. Nonetheless, the Collect we prayed today clearly denotes this as the feast of Christ as King: in fact, it calls Christ the "King of kings and Lord of lords." So I think we should just go with it.

In creating this new feast day for the calendar, Pope Pius XI made it clear that one of his goals was to build up the laity. To quote his words:

"The faithful... will gain much strength and courage, enabling them to form their lives after the true Christian ideal. If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God."

I promise we'll come back to this papal statement in a couple of moments, but first I want to get us—in a slightly roundabout way—to our Scripture readings.

At last week's 8:00 service, Betsy pointed out that the lesson from Matthew was one of several consecutive stories of people awaiting the arrival of someone: a landowner, a bridegroom, a master. And here we are, celebrating Christ as King while still awaiting his arrival, his return. But what kind of king are we waiting for? We know that many of Jesus' followers longed for a king who would restore the glories of the Kingdom of Israel, an heir to David who would free them from the Roman oppressors. We see them now as mistaken about the nature of God's kingdom and the type of king Jesus would be. But how much better is our understanding?

When we think about the Kingdom of Heaven, how much different is our imagining from an earthly kingdom? How much are our visions of Christ the King influenced by images of kings in myth, fairy tale, literature, and history? Even parts of the Scriptures contribute to our images of walled cities, flaming swords, warlike angels, Jesus coming in clouds of glory, light streaming behind him. Sometimes, in my mind's eye, Jesus in the Second Coming looks like a combination of an Old Testament patriarch, a medieval knight in shining armor, Gandalf the Wizard, and all of the Marvel superheroes rolled into one.

Back to that papal message establishing today's feast day; it emphasizes some of the same aspects of our idea of "king." It's a veritable litany of king-related words: power, subjected, dominion, power (again), empire, reign (repeated three more times), submission, obey, and instruments.

We hear the same language in our lesson from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he writes of "the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power." Paul says that Christ is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion," seated at God's right hand with "all things under his feet."

Even Jesus' own description of the coming of the king is replete with regal images: "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." Jesus being Jesus, however, we should be prepared for an immediate twist in his message. And we are not disappointed; in his very next sentence, the king on the throne becomes a shepherd, a humble shepherd separating sheep and goats. We hear the echo of the prophet Ezekiel, who tells us that the Lord God says, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." Ezekiel also tells us that God, in restoring the kingdom of Israel, will make David, or one of his lineage, the people's shepherd.

So, what are these lessons telling us? What does Jesus want us to think about Christ the King when he uses words like "glory" and "throne" in one sentence and "shepherd" in the next? What kind of King and what kind of Kingdom are we celebrating today?

For me, all of these references taken together make up a definition of Christ's "most gracious rule," to quote today's Collect again. Yes, Christ will come again in glory, and He will be king of kings and lord of lords. Yes, he will have power, and glory, and dominion. Yes, we must submit, obey, become subjects and instruments. But all that he asks of us is to love him and to love each other. Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger, to give food and drink to those who hunger and thirst, to dress the naked, to care for the sick, to visit those in prison. This is how the Shepherd King will separate the sheep and the goats. Ezekiel uses the same concept in reverse when he tells us (partly in the passage omitted in today's lesson) that the Shepherd God will judge between sheep and sheep on the basis of their behavior, condemning those who trample the pasture they do not eat, and foul the pool with their feet after they drink, and butt the weaker sheep with shoulder and flank until the flock is broken and scattered.

This is the worship that God asks of us: to look at those beside us as brother and sister, to strive to meet the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves, to share the gifts that God has showered upon us. Christ the King may come in clouds of glory, but I believe that thrones and crowns and scepters and endless ranks of adoring angels and never-ending hymns of praise all mean far, far less to Jesus than our humble hearts loving him and each other.

It's an odd quirk of our church calendar that we end the year by celebrating Christ's coming again, and then immediately start a new year with a period of preparation for the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Time is layered over itself, almost, as we await the Infant's

birth and Christ's return simultaneously. What is most important for us to remember—and to live—is that the message of Jesus in his life on earth, in a specific place and era, is the same as the message of Christ the Shepherd King, who lives among us now, always and everywhere: to love one another, to care for one another, to honor God by treating all as Christ. Amen.