

Christ the King Sunday

Welcome to Christ the King Sunday, known to some as the Reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent. Today allows us to reflect on what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ and what we expect from a leader. And, while there are readings assigned to today, we have the opportunity to look beyond the individual stories to Jesus' entire ministry and what it says to us.

The very title that has been given to today, Christ the KING, may make some of us uncomfortable. Notwithstanding our fascination with the current British royal family as celebrities, we Americans famously threw off the rule of a King and created a new form of government. We associate a king with privilege, unbridled authority, vast wealth, and extravagance. From our perspective, a King is a man isolated from the people, someone who is surrounded by elites seeking influence and personal gain and who rules by royal edict.

Does this sound like the Jesus we've met in the Gospels? Hardly. Jesus seeks out the very people that typical royalty see only from a distance. As Father Justin and others remind us, Jesus takes the concepts of King and Kingdom and turns them upside down.

In Luke's Gospel, as in Matthew and Mark, Jesus begins his ministry with the bold pronouncement that the Kingdom of God is at hand, right now, on earth as it is in heaven. Clad in the plain robes and sandals of peasants, he walked the roads of Judea, traveling extensively but never in the splendor or comfort of royalty. Through his encounters, he teaches us what the kingdom looks like: it is a place where people's burdens are lifted from their shoulders, where the sick are made well and the broken are healed. Gospel stories show us how he leads by example, seeking out the outsider, lifting up the hungry, consoling the sorrowful and touching the untouchable. He relates to people, up close and personal, teaching and showing the way to the Kingdom.

If we know all this about the kingdom of God, why do we need a day designated for Christ the King? The history of this feast day may be of as much interest to you as it is for me.

Unlike many of the important days on the liturgical calendar that go back hundreds of years in Christian history, this day goes back to Europe after World War I. In an encyclical in 1922, Pope Pius XI expressed his concern that, although the war had ended, there was no real peace. He wrote:

Public life is so enveloped . . . by the dense fog of mutual hatreds and grievances that it is almost impossible for the common people so much as freely to breathe therein. . . .

[M]ankind is in the need of spiritual peace. We do not need a peace that will consist merely in acts of external or formal courtesy, but a peace which will penetrate the souls of [humanity] and which will unite, heal, and reopen their hearts to that mutual affection which is born of brotherly love. The peace of Christ is the only peace answering this description. (*Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio*).

Apparently not satisfied with humanity's progress in following the Prince of Peace, the pope took another step in 1925. He initiated Christ the King Sunday to remind Christians that their allegiance is to their spiritual ruler, not the monarchs, tyrants and dictators that were gaining footholds on the continent.

Here we have a grand example of how a person of faith can make a clear statement about the political forces that are at work in the world. He spoke this truth to the people and the politically powerful of Europe: you are following the wrong path; turn around and follow Christ's example.

History tells us that the Reign of Christ did not stop the forces of darkness and war in Europe. Life in the first half of the 20th century took an ugly turn. Millions of people were murdered because of who they were and millions more died as a result of combat. It was a very grim period of human history.

There were, however, glimpses of God's Kingdom, even in the darkest days. Many people found the courage and strength to follow the light of Christ:

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a gifted young German Lutheran minister, gave up the safety of study in New York and London to return to Germany and to publicly lead the opposition to National Socialism.
- Thousands of righteous gentiles – famous diplomats and ordinary people - - risked their lives to save Jewish friends and Jewish strangers (yadvashem.org).
- The Huguenot Village of Le Chambon in Vichy France, lead by its pastor, became a place of refuge for people fleeing the Nazis. These villagers – whose own history included religious persecution -- risked their lives to welcome the stranger and see the dignity of every human being. (Hallie; *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*).

On this day of praise of Christ the King, I see troubling parallels between Europe in the 1920's and America in 2016. I fear that the "deep fog of mutual hatred and grievances" that Pope Pius saw in Europe also envelops us.

The strong and divisive rhetoric from the presidential campaign lingers in public discourse.

Hate crimes are on the increase.

Bullying has become more public and more common.

Many people feel disconnected from their fellow Americans.

We need the peace of Christ that will penetrate our souls and open our hearts.

How do we get out of the fog and into the light? I think that the people of All Saints have started this journey. When we gather for worship in this beautiful sanctuary among these magnificent images of Christ, we nourish our souls and our spirits. When we open the doors of this church to our community to serve our vulnerable neighbors, as we did yesterday, we take another step towards the light.

In these difficult times, we may be called to do more. We may be called to be the voice for the voiceless and the champions of the unpopular. We may have to step out of our comfort zones and into a world that can look like anything but the Kingdom of God.

We will be guided, as always, by scripture. The Prophet Jeremiah has a simple message for the shepherds who fail in their primary task of protecting and nurturing God's people: woe unto you. And, there is God's promise to raise up shepherds who do care for the people so they shall not fear any longer.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul reminds us that strength comes from Christ's glorious power.

And the Gospel reading shows us that, even in midst of the passion, a time of darkness and agony, Jesus forgives his oppressors and points to the presence of God's Kingdom: *today* you will be with me.

A wise person recently said that we Episcopalians are Easter people in a Good Friday world, that even in difficult times, we can find the strength and vision to see new life and new possibilities.

When we feed the hungry, stand up for the voiceless, the poor, and the outsiders, when we follow the example of Jesus the best we can, we carry this message: Christ is our King and, today, the Kingdom of God is at hand.