

The year was 1925 and the Italian Prime Minister and founder of the Italian Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini was trying to make Italy great again. After removing all political opposition through his secret police, Mussolini and his followers consolidated power through a series of laws that transformed the nation into a one-party dictatorship on his way to creating a totalitarian state. Enter Pope Pius XI: Concerned what a totalitarian dictatorship would do to those who follow Christ, Pope Pius XI created the Feast Day of Christ the King: A feast day in which followers of Jesus are reminded that their ultimate allegiance is not to an earthly power, but to the One who is the resurrection and the life; the One who makes all things new.

This should come as no surprise to those who follow Jesus. Throughout the gospels Jesus consistently and unapologetically defies religious and political institutions that seek to come between God and his people. Jesus never wavers in his command that we are to love one another as God has first loved us. He never stops insisting that love be steeped in humility and sacrifice. Jesus never exhibits even an ounce of tolerance for the belief that holy ends justify debased means. Ultimately it is his defiance of “church” and “state” that lands Jesus on the losing end of a Roman Cross.

So when I hear the story of a Pope defying a dictator I pay attention. One need not look far to see that those who have dictatorial desires and authoritarian tendencies are still very much with us today. We see this most clearly in the emerging movement of Christian Nationalism; A movement led by those who believe that their brand of Christianity should enjoy a privileged position in the public square; That their version of Christianity should be the law of the land. I am still sickened to my core when I recall the images of many January 6th insurrectionists inflicting violence on capitol police while carrying placards bearing Jesus’ name.

Sadly, many who claim to be followers of Jesus have given themselves over to the wrong story. A story of conquest and victory at any cost. Yet if they would just read the story that we heard in church this past Sunday, they would hear a different story; a story not of power and glory, but that of a man, though stripped and suffocating, wracked with pain hanging on a cross amidst a sea of mockery and derision, speaks words of blessing and promise in his darkest hour. *“Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.”*

These are not words uttered by a king of power. They are words spoken through blood and tears by the king of love. This is what Christ the King Sunday means to me: In the waters of my baptism, I am compelled to follow the One who embodied self-emptying love for all. My ongoing prayer for us is that in the face of political and social upheaval where hatred and vengeance seem to be the only items on the menu, we will find ways to defy hatred and all who espouse it; That we will walk as Jesus walked – to give ourselves away. To listen. To honor. To protect. To bless.

Centuries ago, Cyril of Alexandria had this to say about Jesus’ kingship.

“Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but his by essence and by nature.”

And what is that essence? What is that nature? Love. That’s it. Love.

Peace and Love,
Pastor Doug