

Christ the King – Year C

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:35-43

Today, as you know is Good Friday, or is it Christ the King Sunday, or is it Good Friday? Our readings today can really throw us into some spiritual confusion. We are not used to hearing these readings outside of Good Friday. It's quite interesting that they are assigned for this, Christ the King Sunday. In the grand scheme of the history of the church Christ the King Sunday is a relatively new addition to the liturgical calendar for the Roman Catholic and mainline protestant churches. If you are unfamiliar, as I was, about the origin of Christ the King Sunday it's quite interesting in how it came to find its place on the calendar. It was developed by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a direct response to the growing nationalism and secularism, smack dab in the middle of the two world wars. There were some ulterior motives with regards to the Roman Church in particular, but in essence Pius XI was attempting to send a reminder and a signal of unity. Despite what country ones passport is issued, how ones country is governed, through monarchy or democratic process – they, we, and all of creation, fall under the reign of the one true authority of God in Christ. Not a bad reminder for us at this time, either.

I feel like it is important to note that there are many in this room, myself included, who may have trouble with the idea of Christ as King. The terms *king*,

kingdom, lord, monarchy, or crown may create some triggers for various different reasons. These types of terms are easily associated with patriarchal systems of oppression that have distinctly and disproportionately impacted groups of people throughout history. That is part of what makes Christ the King Sunday so powerful, the comparing and contrasting earthly attempts to reign, with God. At the same time, these words are just that, words. Whenever it comes to using words to describe God we will always be inadequate. From the start of the Judeo-Christian tradition the attempts to describe God have been rooted in the human understanding and linguist ability to communicate cultural power structures. When it comes to understanding and communicating the power, love and mercy of God we will always be held to the limitations of our own humanity. If the language of this this day is hard for you to digest, challenge yourself to consider a different way of naming the ultimate power in your life, because that is what the attempt is here and was in the early church.

Christ the King Sunday has found its home on the last Sunday after Pentecost which means it is the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar year. A week from today we will begin the season of Advent and we will begin a new liturgical year during which we in the Episcopal Church and many of our siblings in different denominations will predominately hearing from the Gospel of Matthew in Year A of our three year liturgical year cycles. Holding that in context not only is it

the Christ the King Sunday, but it is also the last time we will hear from the Gospel of Luke for a while. What powerful last words, both for Jesus on the Cross but also for the message of the Gospel, the Good News, from the author of Luke.

The tone of what the Reign of Christ was to be is set by Mary's Song of Praise, also known as the Magnificat, found in the first chapter of Luke which calls forth a prophecy of what this Kingdom is to be – "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."¹ In line with Mary's song throughout the Gospel of Luke and this year for us hearers, we have seen Jesus behave in ways that are in direct contrast to how any known earthy "king" would behave. He touched the untouchable, loved the unlovable, dined with the filthy, forgave the unforgiveable, gave worth to women, acknowledged the foreigner, sat with the sinner, healed the broken, raised leaders from the unexpected and challenged tradition. It does not take long to figure out that the leader and ruler in Christ is not about the preservation of the status quo, it is not about protecting future blood lines, it is not about using power from on high to main the place and position of those being led. If you look throughout history those are the basic goal of most if not all earthly monarchies.

¹ Luke 1: 51-53

This way of living led Jesus to be crucified. As we know, crucifixions were typically reserved for those whose crimes were considered direct, usually politically, attacks against the power structure at the time – Rome. This way of execution included humiliation and torture. They were meant to be public spectacles and dare I even say entertainment. The greatest message from the empire was “Do not be like these or you will be next.” With Jesus, hanging on the cross, we have a clear witness of a King who was not the type of ruler whose concern was with saving himself but in the distinct manifestations of righteousness, justice and mercy for all, which was exemplified in the way he lived his life.

The last words that Jesus says before he dies in the Gospel of Luke and the last words we will hear as we turn ourselves towards Advent and the Gospel of Matthew are, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”² Throughout the Gospel of Luke we have hints as to what type of King Jesus will be all leading to this point, when Jesus is executed among criminals who “have been condemned justly”³ and his ministry does not stop. In this moment we recognize that his love, mercy, forgiveness and grace continues to extend as far as at wide as our puny brains can consider. This is the Kingship of Christ.

² Luke 23:43

³ Luke 23:41

As many of you know this weekend was our diocesan convention. Over 500 members of the Diocese of Chicago, lay delegates and clergy gathered to engage in the Episcopal church's governance process. This is truly a gift to apart of, particularly because it is a democratic process that is a distinct juxtaposition to how the church was governed and still is for some denominations with one, usually a man, at the head. This imperfect process (again we are still humans trying our best) attempts to highlight voices from throughout our diocese in the process of determining policies and practices that will impact all of us. A very important part of convention is worship, Thank God! Yesterday, during our closing Eucharist I was struck by one particular hymn *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*, a hymn that I love very much and yesterday I heard it with fresh ears. I think partially I was struck because I was thinking about this sermon and Christ the King was on my mind. If you will bear with me, I encourage you to take a breath and consider Christ as King while I share these lyrics with you.

*There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner,
and more graces for the good;
there is mercy with the Savior;
there is healing in His blood.*

*There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven;*

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*there is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.
There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the Head.*

*For the love of God is broader
than the measure of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.⁴*

May we challenge ourselves to be a church that reflects the wideness and the love
of God, of Christ our King.

Amen

⁴ Frederick William Faber – #469 in the 1982 Hymnal