

Sermon, November 22, 2020
Last Sunday after Pentecost: Feast of Christ the King
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Each year we celebrate the feast of Christ the King and each year, I believe we are called to consider the powers that hold sway over our lives and we are called in spite of such powers to remember that Christ is still king. I believe that this feast day stands as reminder for perspective despite the brutal realities of the times, and I believe this because of the feast's history. Today is not the first time the gospel of Matthew 25 has been read in the midst of a difficult point in history. From the beginning, the observance of Christ the King was instituted by Pope Pius XI who did so in response to the terrors of his own time, a time in which Italy faced the rise of fascism and Benito Mussolini, a time when the world was emerging from the First World War to breathe for just moment before the second.

Pius' call to Christ the King and our Gospel reading make me grateful because they remind me that Christ the King still now sees, acknowledges, and participates in our struggles and hurts, and encourages us to believe we can respond to such difficulties in our lives. Our Gospel today leads me to appreciate that Christ understands the struggle it is to live through difficult times because our Gospel identifies Christ with those who suffer. The reading does so as Jesus explains that when the Son of Man sits upon his throne of glory, he will laud and accept those who responded to the least of those who are the members of Christ's family. Jesus explicitly states that he feels the pangs of the hungry and the thirsty, the isolation and fear of the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner.

And Jesus' identification with these who suffer heartens me when I think to how we suffer, especially now. We are called to the good work of loving our neighbor as ourselves, and we are often the hungry calling to be fed, the stranger who seeks to be understood, the prisoner barred by the guilt and the shame of our failures and in need of forgiveness as we repent. And Christ is with us in such struggle. Christ the King bore the painful realities of the oppressed in Jesus' life, in the times of Pius XI and now with us, Christ too experiences the tremendous harm surrounding the pandemic. I believe that Jesus suffers with the whole human family, with us and those we love in the particular hardships of this time. And this is a time in which I believe we have all experienced very real loss and pain. In the midst of this pandemic, I suspect some of you have lost friends or family to the virus; you may have job security, or financial security. I suspect some of you have faced fear for your health or the health of family and friends. Some of you have lost, for this time, the ability to be with communities who have nourished you, some have lost the ability to simply get to the gym or your favorite restaurant, for some the ability to act or sing or perform music with and for others as you once did. Certainly as a parish we have been subject to the powers of this pandemic as we work to faithfully participate in worship through song and sacrament, juggling risk and hope as we oscillate between virtual and in-person worship, earnestly finding ways to express the profoundly beautiful and meaningful elements of Ascension's identity.

And in this, our context, I believe that our Gospel reminds us that Christ sees in us the impact of our times; the harms of this pandemic and whatever else may torment us. And yet as Christ participates in our humanity and our suffering, Christ urges us to believe we can act in response to that suffering.

Christ the King empowers and encourages us to act in spite of our trials and hurts; he reminds us that we do have the power to make a difference. Christ reminds us that in spite of our own suffering, we can find ways to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, and visit the sick and the prisoner. Indeed, it is our calling to do so; to live out the promise from our baptismal covenants to seek and serve Christ in all person, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We can confront the chaos of our lives, the unknown of the day to day through the mystery of Christ the King at work in our lives; in the specificity of each of us.

And what a gift this is. It is a gift to know that we may act on behalf of the King of Creation who opposes the evils of our world which so ardently affect us. We can share our gifts, act through our baptismal ministries, and continue to explore the mystery of who Christ has called us to be knowing that the kindnesses which way may commit have ultimate significance. At the last, Christ the King will sit on his throne of glory and I truly believe will name the good we have done. I believe he will name the troubleshooting of zoom done to make these worship experiences happen, Christ will name the goodness of those hosting coffee hour and evening prayer, those who have borne testament to their struggles and experiences as a means of listening to others and offering guidance, those who have been silent witnesses to the losses of others, to those who have created music though they cannot sing with others now, those who have given of themselves such that the hungry may be fed this Thanksgiving. Christ the King will laud the efforts made to love one's neighbor as one's self; knowing well that love is given by those who are often hurting the worst. I believe Christ knows what it means to love another in hurt and hard times because though he will rule from the throne of his glory, he has also ruled from the cross. So my hope is this. May we also now bear our own crosses knowing that Jesus Christ is with us in our troubles, and may we do the good work that Christ our King calls us to do.