

What Kind of King is This?

It is a relatively young tradition, this celebration of Christ the King on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. It was first instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. Apparently, the Pope looked around him in those years following the War to End All Wars, observed the Roaring Twenties and the rise of Communism, and decided that the world needed to be reminded who was ultimately in charge. It is certainly a message that the world needed and still needs to hear. Human beings never like to consider anyone but themselves as “in charge.” But the delivery of the message that the Pope apparently intended is complicated by at least two things. First, the understanding of kingship is far from universal as the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has moved farther and farther away from a monarchical model of government. Second, Jesus never did fit anyone’s model of what a king was all about. So how is it that we can understand what it means to proclaim that Jesus Christ is King and how is it that Christ’s kingship can make a difference in our lives and in our world?

It’s hard for us to get our heads around the nature of kingship that would have been immediately understood by Jesus’ contemporaries and that was referenced by Pius XI in his declaration of “the Solemnity of Christ the King.” Very few of us here this morning have lived in a country with a reigning monarch and even that experience is of a constitutional monarchy rather than the absolute monarchies of the ancient world. Of course, we assume that we understand the nature of kingship and we’re pretty sure we don’t like the idea. My generation’s troubadour of the working class, Bruce Springsteen, summed up our jaundiced view of monarchy in “Badlands”:
“Poor man want to be rich, rich man want to be king, and a king ain’t satisfied ‘til he rules everything.” That doesn’t really sound like Jesus to us, especially with the story of his self-sacrifice still ringing in our ears. How can our picture of a power-grasping king help us to understand the Good News of Jesus?

It is not a contemporary dilemma. The Jewish and Roman leaders, the soldiers and the mob that attended Jesus’ trial, scourging and execution, none of them could make sense of how this man could be king, either. Another contemporary lyricist, Tim Rice, captured the sense of puzzlement and ridicule that we find in the Gospels, with his words for Pilate in “Jesus Christ Superstar”: “Oh, so this is Jesus Christ. I am really quite surprised. You look so small; not a king at all.” In “Superstar,” Pilate and Herod both go on to question and taunt Jesus, who certainly doesn’t fit their image of a king. This fits with the story as Luke tells it. Unlike Tim Rice, who focuses on Jesus’ own thoughts during the crucifixion, Luke gives voice to those who abused Jesus even as he was dying.

In fact, Luke relates the circumstances of Jesus’ death in a way that leads us back to the very beginning of his ministry. Following the story of Jesus’ baptism by John in Luke 3, we read in Luke 4 of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. There, Satan questions Jesus’ identity and proposes tests for him to reveal himself. “If you are the Son of God,” he begins, “command this stone to become bread;” a temptation, perhaps, to accomplish his mission with showy miracles benefitting the people. The devil tempts Jesus next to take authority over all earthly kingdoms. Finally, he says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down” from the pinnacle of the Temple. Show that you are invulnerable, in other words. When Jesus declines these temptations, Luke writes, “the devil... departed from him until an opportune time.” Satan had misunderstood his target. Jesus was uninterested in miracles that would get people to flock to him or in worldly power or in showing off his divinity in spectacle. For Luke, at the end of

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Jesus' ministry, his enemies misunderstand him in exactly the same way. The leaders scoff and say, "if he is the Messiah of God, let him save himself;" let him prove his invulnerability. The soldiers mock him with the title Pilate has told them to mount above him, King of the Jews, and wonder why a king can't save himself with power. The first thief, demands a miracle that will save both Jesus and his condemned companions. But just as Jesus rebuffs the temptations of the devil at the beginning of his ministry, so he rejects these temptations, refusing to play into human expectations of power and kingship.

But Jesus does display his Kingly nature at the cross, in ways that run counter to the understandings of those who were gathered there. He does this in a way that also hearkens back to the truths revealed early in Luke's Gospel. Jesus has not said much since his arrest but in our passage this morning, Luke records two important things that he said from the cross. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," is the first. The second is "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." A word of forgiveness and a word of liberation. Forgiveness for those who didn't even realize they needed it; liberation for one who barely dared to hope for it. Acts of pardon and release are the true prerogative of kings, even when human expectations are that they will not exercise them very often – at least, not without self-serving reasons. Jesus reveals the core of his identity as King, restates the essence of his mission in those two sentences from the cross. Remember what some have called his "mission statement" in Luke 4: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That too is a word of forgiveness and liberation. In fact, as one commentator has pointed out, "Jesus' kind words of promised salvation ... transport us as readers right back to Luke 1 when Mary—bearing already then the microscopic zygote of the Savior within her small uterus—proclaimed that '(God's) mercy extends to those who love him . . . he has lifted up the humble but sent the rich away empty.'"

We don't know from whom Luke learned the details of Jesus' life. But whatever witnesses shared their memories or passed on stories to Luke, the cumulative effect of their remembrances clearly made an impact on the writer. For Luke, Jesus was and is the kind of King who made the poor a priority, who cared deeply about those who had nothing in the eyes of humankind. As Luke understands the Christ-event, "Jesus made clear that the kingdom of God is most concerned with the dispossessed, the lost, the last, the least, the downtrodden." Is it any wonder that the self-important leaders of the Sanhedrin, Herod (who claimed friendship with Caesar), Pilate, the representative of the power of Rome, none of them could fathom what Jesus' kingship was all about?

But the repentant thief got it. He looked at Jesus and saw a king. Perhaps that truth can only be understood by those who can no longer rest on their pride, on those whom the world holds at naught and who know their own need for redemption. In this passage from Luke, those who taunt Jesus comprise a descending social scale: first the Jewish leadership, then the Roman soldiers, and finally, the first condemned criminal. It takes the second robber who is being crucified to recognize the quiet royalty among them. In the same way, it is another writer who has experienced judgment and thrown away pride who gives us the exalted words of Christ the King this morning. Paul, who saw himself as the chief of sinners, in need of forgiveness and

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liberation, wrote to the church in Colossae, “(God) has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Paul recognizes that Jesus reveals himself as King as he engages in acts of forgiveness and liberation because this is when he displays the greatest attributes that God has shown again and again to his wandering, murmuring, faithless people. In echoing the deeds of the Creator of the Universe, in behaving as a true Son of the Loving Father, Jesus participates in the very being of God Godself. Paul uses a word in relating this to the Colossians that is startlingly relevant for 21st Century post-moderns after over a millennium of disuse in the West. Jesus, he writes, “is the image of the invisible God.” The Greek word for image, in this sentence, is *ικον*. Jesus is the icon of God. Until very recently, unless you were a member of one of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the concept of an icon as revelatory of something greater would have seemed foreign to you. But in 1983, Steve Jobs, not generally thought of as a contributor to contemporary theology, changed all that with his company’s introduction of the Apple Lisa and its graphical user interface, or GUI. Thanks to the GUI of Lisa and Macintosh and their copycat competitor, Windows, icon has a whole new meaning for us. The Rev. Dr. Fred Anderson connects the technological with the theological very aptly. “As icon of the invisible (Jesus) is more than simply what God looks like,” he writes. “He is also the One through whom you and I enter into God’s eternal yet ever immanent presence. That is what icons do for us; they transport us into the reality they signify. The world of computers gives us an immediate illustration. When you click on an icon, the program behind it opens to you, and you find yourself transported into its wondrous world. In a religious and liturgical frame of reference, focusing on an icon draws you through that image into the presence of the one so portrayed... (Jesus) is the one through whom you and I can be drawn into the very presence of the invisible God. He is the icon of God, the image of the invisible.” As the image of the invisible Almighty, Jesus participates in God’s character. Inasmuch as God’s glory can be characterized as majesty, so do we understand Jesus as King.

The language Paul uses to describe the nature of Jesus as King is breathtaking, as spectacular as the pomp of any king could possibly be and then some. “God’s beloved Son; the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; (creator of) all things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” But just as important to Paul as all of these magnificent attributes of Jesus, is the work of Jesus. “In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” Together, these ideas are the Good News. That God’s beloved Son, with all the glory of God, came and gave his very life to bring humankind into loving relationship with God, reconciled and forgiven. Truly this mighty work could only be accomplished by the greatest king humankind has ever known.

In reflecting on why it is important that we should take one Sunday a year to celebrate Christ Jesus as King, author and artist Laurence Stookey writes, “Talk about the reign of God makes

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apparent the deficiencies of human rulers and provides clues as to what might make human governance more just.” Indeed, as we move from our local election season, some results of which we may have found disappointing, towards the already superheated national campaigns, I believe we would do well to evaluate our own leaders by the criteria of the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ. Is there a concern for the poor, for “the dispossessed, the lost, the last, the least, the downtrodden?” Is there, from our political leaders and candidates, a word of liberation? A word of forgiveness? This is an issue that transcends party affiliation, religious affiliation or any other human construct. As members of the Body of Christ, our loyalty is due to Christ above all. Those who show by their words and actions that they also understand the loving, self-giving kingship exemplified by Jesus are those who are worthy of our most serious consideration in the days to come.

But there is another reason to contemplate the nature of Christ our King. Since we are the Body of Christ, the mission of Jesus has now been entrusted to us. It is through us, reconciled to God, that Christ now reigns. As we hear and read Luke’s account of Jesus on the cross, we find our model for coping with violence and defeat through forgiveness and love. But we are challenged by the words of Paul not only “to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father,” but also “to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.” Our inheritance, our role as the Body, is to take the forgiveness and liberation that we have received and to continue our King’s work of reconciliation. Hear these further words from Rev. Dr. Fred Anderson: “Christ reigns in and through each of us. As a consequence, you and I are called to be Christ to others, seeking reconciliation where there is alienation, healing where there is brokenness--brokenness in the church, brokenness in this nation, brokenness in this world. This is our mandate, our mission, our vocation. Those who dare to claim the name of Christ must bear him, heeding his call to heal divisions, restore life and seek peace; that is what it means to be a Christ bearer. For, you see, Christ not only saves souls--reconciling them to his Father--Christ calls on all souls to be reconciled to one another and work for peace and security between enemies. Christ commands that you and I find ways to address whatever injustices we encounter, wherever we encounter them in this world, and resolve them peacefully. Why? Because it is Christ’s life that is at the center of all life in this world, holding it together for his and his Father’s purposes. He is head of the church and becomes present in this world each time you and I make him sovereign in our own lives.”

In today’s scripture, we remember the suffering Jesus. Also in our scripture and in our singing, we celebrate the exalted Christ. But how we remember and how we celebrate in this place is only significant if our sorrow and our joy combine in action. It is right and proper that we should sing praises to the Lamb upon his throne. But all our cries of “All hail, Redeemer, hail!” are empty if we do not carry our adoration into the world as deeds of mercy and peace. Unless Jesus is our model both in times of trial and in times of triumph, then any rejoicing we offer for Christ’s kingdom is hollow. We may raise our voices in songs of praise until the heavens ring, but it means nothing unless Jesus is king of our hearts and our minds and all our strength. We must crown Jesus as Lord by offering him our lives, our deeds, all that is ours and all that is us, or we join Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas and the rest in rejecting Jesus as “a broken man... a joke... a fraud... a silent king.” Our King is not silent; he spoke of love and forgiveness, of liberation and reconciliation, and he speaks yet today in the voice of the prisoner, of the homeless man, of the hungry child, of the abused woman, of the victim of war. If we are to be a

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part of his kingdom, if we are to rejoice in our inheritance with the saints in the light, then we must hear His voice and respond just as he would have done. And then we can truly call Christ our King for then we will know what kind of King this is. Thanks be to God.