

Sunday, November 24, 2019

Christ the King (Year C)

Jeremiah 23.1-6; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43

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Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. While Christians have always recognized and used the language of Christ as King, this is, surprisingly, a fairly new commemoration in the Christian liturgical calendar. For 19 centuries, the “civilized world” (i.e. Europe) was comprised of Christian nations. Their rulers—monarchs all—were generally viewed as being anointed by God. And in the case of our own mother country, England, the monarch even bore the title of “Defender of the Faith.” But all that began to change in the years after World War I. In the post-war years, the political map, particularly of Europe, began to change. And the nature of governments likewise changed. The modern world and its governments were becoming increasingly secular and non-Christian. The Church was losing its influence and, as a result, there was an increase in anti-clericalism.

In the face of this changing political landscape, Pope Pius XI in 1925 issued his encyclical *Quas Primas* which instituted the Feast of Christ the King, partially in response to political questions regarding Papal territories, and partially in response to growing secularism, nationalism, and anti-clericalism. Addressed to the hierarchy of the church, the encyclical warns that “as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Savior, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations” (*Quas Primas*, §1).

In a world that is experiencing an increase in nationalism and political division, and a decrease in participation, and even interest, in the institutional Church, *Quas Primas* is as relevant today as it was 96 years ago. Maybe even more so. On this Feast of Christ the King, our Scripture readings challenge us to examine our priorities and to assess just where our true allegiances lie.

Throughout Scripture, we see that God’s power and majesty are radically different from those of human rulers—monarchs, presidents, or dictators. While we in this country overthrew the bonds of monarchy 243 years ago and thus have a slight aversion to royal language, we need to return to the image of king—of God as King, of Christ as King—as a way of correcting and redeeming the distorted and abusive images associated not only with human monarchs, but of political leaders regardless of title.

While the commemoration of Christ the King has only been a feast of the Church for 96 years, such distorted and abusive images of our leaders is much older. Even older than the 2,000-year history of our religion. It is something that the human race has been struggling with for pretty much as long as we have had designated rulers. Just consider our first reading from the Prophet Jeremiah. This reading juxtaposes the ideal image of a leader with the realities at the time of the Exile.

In many ancient Near Eastern texts, rulers were likened to shepherds. Just as shepherds were responsible for the nourishing, care, and protection of their flock, this metaphor suggests that

kings were responsible for caring for their people, insuring the security and prosperity of the nation. In Hebrew, the verb “to shepherd” also means “to rule.”

This is the image. The ideal. But as we see in our Old Testament reading, God speaking through Jeremiah condemns the rulers who are supposed to be acting as shepherds to the people, yet who are corrupt and only concerned with their own self-interests. God declares “I will attend to you for your evil doings . . . I myself will gather the remnant of my flock . . . and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply” (Jer 23.2c-3).

God then proceeds to reveal how he will do this. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer 23.5). This recalls another ancient Near Eastern metaphor of the king as being likened to the tree of life—an image that the king was the center and source of life for the nation. God promises a future king, a tree growing through David’s line who will ensure that God’s righteousness and justice shall prevail for the benefit of his people. Indeed, throughout its history, the Church has understood and taught that David as the shepherd who became king of Israel is the image and forerunner of Christ as the Good Shepherd who is also King of kings.

In our own day, none of our political leaders would think twice about hearing Jesus referred to as King or Lord. Nor would they feel threatened by such assertions. In fact, many of our leaders likely use this language as an expression of their own faith. But in the first century, Roman rulers and citizens of the Roman Empire would have viewed such language as treasonous. As a serious challenge to the authority of the Empire. To the authority of the emperor, who was viewed not only as supreme leader, but also as a god.

In fact, as we know, the alleged crime for which Jesus was ultimately tried, found guilty, and executed was that of sedition. Of treason for professing to be the Messiah, the king of the Jews. Whether he actually said this about himself or not matters little. The Jewish authorities indicted Jesus on charges of blasphemy for professing to be the Son of God and then remanded him over to Rome under the pretext that Jesus claimed to be king of the Jews, knowing what their position would be. And the punishment for this self-professed king was to be executed in the most horrific of ways—a punishment reserved for the lowest of the low. The Romans’ expression of irony. That this supposed king would not sit on a throne, but would be nailed to a cross like a common criminal.

But the Roman sense of irony was, ironically, turned around by Jesus and by God. Even on the cross, as he faced his last minutes of life, Jesus’ primary concern was not for himself or what would happen to him, but for the repentant criminal that hung beside him. Concern for a beloved child of God. The concern that a shepherd has for one of his sheep. As one commentator notes, “Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross is the ultimate expression of his kingship, and it redefines worldly assumptions about power and authority. Solidifying his connection with humanity, as well as his divinity, Jesus rules through radical self-giving love . . . With the cross as his throne, Jesus’ sacrificial life and ministry were radically transformed into the ideal of true kingly power—defined by compassion, forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life.” (*Synthesis*, Proper 29, 11/24/19)

This is what God intends God's kingdom to look like. And in that kingdom, Jesus exercises kingship in a way that has never been seen or experienced in our world. That the instruments of his kingship, the instruments of his power, are not about self-interest, but about selfless love. That the instruments of his power are not about being self-serving, but about serving others. This is expressed not in life spent on a throne, but in death on a cross.

After his death and resurrection, the early Church recognized the kingship of Christ and that through him, we are made part of his kingdom. In our reading from Colossians, we hear that 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" (Col 1.13-14). Of the primacy of God's Kingdom and of Christ as King, the author of Colossians goes on to write, "in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1.16). This is the kingdom that Christ rules. This is the kingdom of which we are citizens.

We live in a time when many feel our nation is more divided than ever, largely because of our own leaders. We view the deepening divides in our nation with anxiety, concern, even dread. In the face of such polarization and the fears that come with it, how do we hear and respond to the image of Christ as our King? How does the image of Christ the King guide us and even challenge us as Christians?

While *Quas Primas* was specifically addressed to Roman Catholic bishops, the intent applies to all Christians—Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, clergy and lay alike. In the concluding section, Pope Pius wrote: "He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls" (*Quas Primas*, §33).

The Feast of Christ the King raises a timeless question: Do we belong to the world, or do we belong to Christ? Do we adhere to the ways of the world, or do we adhere to the example of Christ? If we profess to be Christians, the answer is clear. As Brother James Koester of the Society of St. John the Evangelist writes, "Our citizenship is not of this world. We are citizens of another country, whose king is a servant, whose orb is a towel, whose scepter a wash basin, whose crown is humility, and whose motto is service. As citizens and subjects of that kingdom, we cannot swear ultimate allegiance in any other way than taking up our towels, holding our basins, and getting down on our knees" (Br. James Koester, SSJE, "Brother, Give Us a Word" email, 11/15/19).

Not to sound like a campaign stump speech, but it all comes down to what kind of world we want to live in and who it is who can lead us there. Because it really does all come down to where we place our allegiance. So, where does your true allegiance lie?