

Sunday, November 21, 2021

Christ the King (Year B)

Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1.4b-8; John 18.33-37

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/587274955891312>

(Sermon begins at about 17:45)

“Being Subjects of Christ the King”

The last Sunday of the liturgical year—that would be today—is designated as the Feast of Christ the King. We are accustomed to hearing Jesus Christ referred to in royal language. We hear him referred to as “Lord” on numerous occasions in Scripture. Shortly after his birth, the Magi referred to Jesus as “King of the Jews.” This same title is used mockingly at his trial before Pontius Pilate, as we heard in today’s Gospel. And then again at his crucifixion. We often refer to him as the Prince of Peace, particularly around Christmas time—a reference made by the prophet Isaiah to a future messianic king. And we sometimes refer to Jesus as the “King of Kings.” But what does such royal language mean, particularly in our own lives? Particularly in our own context that is decidedly non-, even anti-, monarchical.

Christ the King Sunday was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to the rise of class division along with exploitative consumerism, as well as increased secularism and the rise of nationalism. As a result of what was going on in the world around them, many people were beginning to doubt Christ’s authority and even his existence. Through the Feast of Christ the King, the Church sought to reinforce the fact that Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is given all power in heaven and on earth. He is therefore the ruler of all that is—the King of all Creation.

While this holy day was established nearly a century ago, the circumstances prompting it have changed little. And I would argue, if anything, they have gotten worse in recent years. Consumerism is more prevalent than ever. There is a significant increase in secularism in our society. There are increased threats of corrupt and evil powers in the world. There is an increase in more extreme forms of nationalism in our own country and around the world, much of it being proclaimed in the name of Christianity. Which adds to the mix religious extremism that perverts the teachings of God for misguided and evil purposes. As Christians, our response to all of this, to the sin and destruction we witness, to the fears and uncertainty this brings, is to turn to, or return to, the image of Christ the King.

The need for refocusing on our God and particularly on Christ the King is not new. It was not new when Pope Pius established this holy day. It is really something that is foundational to our life as the people of God, as the Body of Christ. Something that is recorded in the words of Holy Scripture. And we have some examples of these images of looking to our king in today’s scripture readings.

We start off by hearing from the prophet Daniel. Now certainly Daniel was not Christian. He was a Jewish prophet writing 160 years before the birth of Christ, to provide comfort to the Jewish people living under political oppression. Specifically, he is foretelling the coming of a

messiah—one who would liberate the people from domination by the Greeks. Of this messiah Daniel writes, “To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed” (Dan 7.14). This messiah is described in terms of kingship—one who has ultimate authority over his people. Not in an oppressive way, out of selfish motives or for personal gain, but in a merciful way, out of love and concern for his people. In the Christian Era we recognize that Daniel was not writing about just any messiah, but was foretelling the coming of THE Messiah.

This image of the coming Messiah contained in the apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament, is further developed and expounded upon in the New Testament’s apocalyptic writing—in the Revelation to John. Providing imagery of the end of the ages, the section we heard this morning anticipates a final decisive battle in which evil will finally and ultimately be defeated, bringing about the fullness of the kingdom of God. And we hear of the place of Jesus, who as the Son of God, as the “firstborn from the dead,” who is “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1.5a). In other words, he has dominion over all Creation.

Furthermore, we hear more directly the nature of his kingship. He is one “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (Rev 1.5b-6). This is a king who loves us so much that he gave his blood, his very life, for us, to wipe away our sins. This is not a king who subjugates his people, but rather one who frees them. Frees them from sin. Frees them from death.

This takes us to our Gospel reading from John—the Gospel account of the passion that really emphasizes Jesus as king. In this passage, Pontius Pilate specifically asks Jesus if he is a king. Initially, Jesus dances around the question. Pilate tries another approach, asking Jesus what he has done. While Jesus does not directly answer that question, he does get back to Pilate’s original question, responding with “my kingdom is not from this world . . . my kingdom is not from here” (Jn 18.36). Pilate jumps on this reply: “so you are a king?” To which Jesus responds, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born . . .” (Jn 18.37).

This shows a great humility on Jesus’ part—that he has no need to dwell on or lord over others the fact that he is King. Despite this final confession, or implied confession, that Jesus is indeed a king, Pilate does not choose to find Jesus guilty under Roman law—that there can be no king but the emperor. Rather, Pilate leaves the matter up to the crowd. Out of fear for their position, the religious authorities incite the crowd to demand Jesus’ death. Their actions are prompted by their fear that he might just be a king after all—not just any king, but the Messiah. It is precisely because of this, because of these fears, that Jesus is put to death. And what follows—his resurrection—proves that Jesus is indeed not just any king, but the King of all kings. That he is king even over sin and death. That he is the Messiah.

So, what does this mean for those of us who profess to follow Christ the King? Our passage from Revelation not only highlights the role of Christ as King, it also tells us of our place in his kingdom. That he “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.” We are an entire kingdom of priests, set apart and ordained by God with the charge and purpose to serve

God and to serve our neighbors. We are brought into the very heart of the mission of God's kingdom. We are loved and trusted so much that we are made integral parts of that kingdom.

What that means is exemplified through Jesus himself. That Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is given all power in heaven and on earth. He is therefore the ruler of all that is. As ruler of all that is, that makes Jesus the ultimate authority in our lives, as well. We are completely his. As followers of Christ the King who gave his life for us, we then are called to do likewise—to give our lives for him as priests in service to him and to God. No aspect of our lives is exempt from his reign. He reigns in our minds through our belief and assent to his teachings. He reigns in our wills through our obedience to God's laws and commandments. He reigns in our hearts, through our love of God and our neighbors. And he reigns in our bodies, which serve as instruments to do God's work in the world around us, as we seek to emulate Jesus' life and ministry through our own lives and actions.

Scripture is very clear on who Jesus is as our king. The Bible promises that God's power and majesty differ radically from that of human powers and authorities. We see that Christ's kingship is not about lording power over others, but about humility and service. When we celebrate Christ as King, we are not celebrating an oppressive ruler, but one who genuinely loves us and cares about us, to the point that he was willing to die for us for the forgiveness of our sins and to bring us salvation. To bring us into eternal life with him. This is the ultimate expression of the Kingdom of God.

And scripture is very clear on our response to Christ the King. We are invited to be partners with God, to be co-creators, in building up the kingdom of God. As the Body of Christ, we are called to be his hands and heart in the world. Doing the work of our King in the world here and now.

On this day, we not only celebrate Christ the King. We also celebrate our place in his kingdom. To participate in what God is up to in this world, as we, too, work to make the Kingdom of God a reality. A kingdom where the violent nature of power in this world is countered and overthrown by Jesus' reign. A kingdom centered in truth—the truth of God's unbounded love for us, exemplified by Jesus' death and resurrection. A truth that turns hate into love. That turns sin into righteousness. That turns death into life. That turns destruction into building up. That turns fear into joy. And that turns uncertainty into hope.