

It's Good to be the King
November 25, 2018

How many people knew that today is Christ the King Sunday? And I mean knew that before you got here and saw it printed on the bulletin. (Raise your hands if you did) It's not really surprising. Christ the King Sunday is one of those events on the church calendar that we don't think too much about.

I can think of a lot of reasons for this- the first being that it falls on a Sunday that is easy to overlook- it is always on the Sunday before the first Sunday of Advent, so it is either the weekend before Thanksgiving or Thanksgiving weekend. And we would much rather focus on giving thanks and on the excitement of the coming of Advent than we would on Christ the King.

A second reason is that it is a relatively new addition to the church calendar. It was first created by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a way to remind people that Christ is the ultimate king. Initially it was observed on the last Sunday of October, just before All Saints Day. Then in 1970, it was moved to its current place on the church calendar- the Sunday before the first Sunday of Advent. It began to be observed in Protestant Churches around 1983, with the introduction of the Common Lectionary- which most mainline Protestant churches use so that we all have the same scripture readings each week.

A third reason why we tend to ignore or overlook Christ the King Sunday is that we are just not that comfortable with the whole idea of a "king". Even those with the most basic knowledge of world history know that kings are almost always deposed, that a monarchy rarely works. Even the most famous monarch in the world, Queen Elizabeth, isn't much more than a figurehead. The United States of America was founded as an effort to get away from being under the rule of a king- so why would we want to go back to it now, even if the king is Jesus Christ?

But the final reason that we don't pay much attention to Christ the King Sunday is that we really don't like to think of Jesus in that way. We have trouble seeing him fitting into what we see king's being like- regal and overbearing, far removed from the daily lives of his subjects, sitting on his throne being served. I think that this is the main reason we would just as soon overlook Christ the King Sunday, it just doesn't seem right for the Jesus that we know, the Christ that we need.

It's ironic when you think about it. We don't like to think of Jesus as a King because a king isn't anything like the Jesus we know, a king isn't anything like the Jesus that is revealed in the gospels. Yet, Jesus was rejected by his own people primarily because he wasn't the kind of king that they were expecting, that they wanted, that they thought they needed.

Jesus' discussion with Pilate about his being a king is informative. After Jesus was betrayed by Judas, and arrested in the Garden, after his so-called "trial" before the Chief Priests and Scribes, the only charge that they can make against him is that he was claiming to be the "Son of God." They take this charge and stretch it to imply that Jesus was claiming to be "King of the Jews" which is a claim that the Romans would find very disturbing.

So they take him to Pilate, who is the highest ranking Roman official in Jerusalem at that time. Pilate tries to avoid the whole situation by telling them to deal with it themselves, but they place the responsibility right back on him as they state that they wouldn't have handed Jesus over to him if he weren't a criminal.

It is after this that Pilate and Jesus have the encounter that we read about this morning, when Pilate asks Jesus if he is indeed the King of the Jews. Jesus reply gets right to the heart of the matter. First he subtly acknowledges that he is a king by saying that his “kingdom is not from this world.” To have a kingdom, you have to be a king.

Then Jesus points out the difference between his kingdom and what Pilate (and most everyone else) would consider to be a kingdom. Jesus is saying that he is a king unlike any other king, and his kingdom is unlike any other, for it is not of this world. If he were a king like any other king and if his kingdom was like all the other kingdoms, then his followers would be doing what any other loyal followers would be doing- fighting to save their king and his kingdom.

So that leaves Pilate with the question- what kind of king is Jesus and what is his kingdom like? That is the subtext behind Pilate’s question, “So you are a King?” What he is really wanting to know is that if Jesus is a king, what kind of king is he that he would let himself be treated like the Chief Priests and scribes were treating him? What kind of king would not have legions of soldiers gearing up for battle to set him free? Just what kind of King is Jesus? And not only is this Pilate’s question but it is the important question for us today as we reflect upon Christ as our king and on his kingdom.

I think that the answer lies in one word- relationship. Jesus’ kingdom is about relationship. Where the kingdoms of this world are about dominance and dominion, the kingdom of God, the kingdom that is ruled by Jesus, is about relationship. A typical king of this world relies on being able to dominate his subjects to obtain his dominion over them. But Christ the King relies on relationship with his children to build community both with them and among them. And that makes him a very different kind of king indeed.

Jesus knows that “My kingdom is not from this world” because it is from God. Jesus knows that he is not a typical king because he is not from this world. He is from God and he IS God. Jesus is the king who became one of his people- not to spy on them like an “undercover boss”- but to see and feel and know what it is like to be them.

Though not talking about Jesus, Atticus Finch said it best in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” That is the kind of king that Jesus is, he is the kind of king who wants so desperately to know his people that he gave up everything that made him a king, and climbed into our skin and walked around with us.

Jesus did that establish a true relationship with us. So that he could know us, understand us, love us, and forgive us. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” As crazy as it may sound, I think that we often actually overlook, or at best downplay, the impact of the Incarnation. We are so used to it, so accustomed to it as part of our faith, that we lose sight of just how revolutionary it was and it is.

God became human and lived among us. God gave up everything that made him the limitless divine and took on all that would make him the limited human. And God did that for us, God did that for the world, because he loved the world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

God showed his love for us by coming down from heaven, climbing into our skin, and walking around. God showed his love for us by then giving up the life that he had taken on and dying on the cross. He who was without sin became sin to free us from our sins and to bring us into relationship with him once and for all.

Richard Rohr puts it like this “every time God forgives us, God is saying that God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us.” This is the kind of king that Christ is, this is what his kingdom is like. When kingdom is built upon the truth of relationship and not rule, from the truth of incarnation and not domination, from the truth of love and not law, then the kingdom of God becomes the kingdom of this world, then it becomes our kingdom.

Today we are celebrating Christ the King. When we call Christ our King what we are saying is the the rules don't matter as much as the relationship. We are saying that we want to live in relationship with him and with each other, that we want to love and be loved- by God and by each other, more than anything else. We want to create that kingdom of community, that kingdom of family, that kingdom of love, right here and right now.

We see signs of it all around us already. You can see it in this tree. For those of you who weren't able to be at our Thanksgiving Lovefeast last Sunday, this is our Tree of Thanks. As we sang the last hymn of our service, Now Thank We All Our God, everyone here was given the chance to take one of these many colored leaves and write on it a few words of thanks to God. Then we all brought them forward and hung them on the tree. It was a powerful moment, a visible reminder of the blessings that God has bestowed upon us, a symbol of what it looks like to be living life in Christ's kingdom. It was and is so powerful that we decided to leave it here for this Sunday, too. An unusual symbol for a far from typical king.

I spent some time this week looking at the leaves on the tree, reading the things that we are feeling thankful for and about. And one word kept showing up on leaf after leaf after leaf. “Family” -those who we know and love and those who know us and love us. That is what this church is, it is a family, we are a family.

We come together, united by our common love- our love for God and our love for each other. We come together as a family, sharing the joys and the struggles of life, the triumphs and the tragedies, the laughter and the tears; sharing our faith, our love, and our hope. We come here and we become citizens of the kingdom of Christ, we become members of the family of Jesus. And here we have a king who loves us and knows us, who knows us well, he knows what it is like to be us because he became one of us. He knows us and loves us anyway- despite our faults and our failings.

Next week, this tree of thanks will be gone. It will be replaced by different symbols as we prepare to welcome Jesus into our world again. But today, let us enjoy it and let us see it for what it is- it is a picture of the kingdom of Christ, of the family of Jesus, it is a symbol of us. I imagine that Jesus takes a look at it, with all of its bright colors and beautiful words, I imagine that Jesus takes a look at us, with all of our bright colors and our beautiful words, with all of our faults and failings, and all of our sins and sorrows, and with all of our faith, love, and hope, I imagine that Jesus takes a look at us, the citizens of his kingdom and the members of his family, he looks at us and thinks "It's good to be the king."

Amen