

SERMON: Last Pentecost B

Christ the King Sunday

John 18:33-37

Preached Sunday, November 22, 2009 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Today is the last Sunday of Pentecost, also known as Christ the King Sunday.

I'm doing a children's sermon at our Hosannah service, and I wanted to use some kind of prop to make my point. And ... here it is [*show crown*]. I'm not going to do the whole children's sermon for you, but I'll start with the same question I'm using with them: When you see this, what comes to mind? What are the qualities we associate with kingship?

Royalty and kingship make me think of someone with great power, someone at the "top of the food chain," so to speak. It also makes me think of the strange nature of the monarchy in England. I don't know how many of you saw the movie that came out three years ago called "The Queen," starring Helen Mirren. I recommend it as a masterful portrayal of the challenges faced by the British royal family after the death of Lady Diana. It showed the queen wrestling with the questions of whether to remember Diana as "The People's Princess," and whether the royal family should share its grief with the public.

I mention this because I think most of us in this 21st century western world are deeply ambivalent about the whole idea of kingship. It's true that royalty can give us quite a show when it comes to weddings and funerals. And they certainly kept the British tabloids filled with stories before Diana's death. But beyond this and a few romantic fairytales, most of us question the value of kings and queens in our age of democracy, globalization and universal human rights.

Even the Church has trouble figuring out what to do with the word "king." Some churches that celebrate this day prefer to call it The Reign of Christ. The feast of Christ the King was instituted less than a century ago, in 1925. Pope Pius XI initiated it in response to the rise of nationalism, which was threatening the entire world. The pope noted that Jesus' kingship is not achieved through coercion: "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but his by essence and by nature." The new feast was instituted to remind Christians that our allegiance is first and foremost to our spiritual Master. The reign of Christ – "the ruler of our hearts" – is in stark contrast to the claims of any earthly ruler.*

Apparently, some things never change. Even the authors of Holy Scripture seem ambivalent about the nature of Christ's rule. In our reading from the Revelation to John, Jesus is described as "the ruler of the kings of the earth," "the Alpha and the Omega," "who is and who was and who is to come" (1:5 & 8). But notice what happens when Jesus is actually asked about his title. "Are you the king of the Jews?" says Pilate. And Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not from this world.... For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (18:33, 36-37). Pilate fears that Jesus might claim some sort of earthly authority. But when Jesus rejects it, Pilate doesn't know what to say. And, fair enough. What can anyone say to someone who rejects everything except

truth and love?

*John Kavanaugh, a Jesuit writer, said the kingship of Christ will always be at odds with the ways of the world. He calls Jesus the “king-servant” who “is strangely grand and noble, yet only in his quiet vulnerability and the utter truth of his being. He does not muster armies or amass territories. He just invites, relying on nothing other than our hearts' response.” The kingdom of Christ, says Kavanaugh, is not created through warfare. “Rather, it testifies to truth. It will not kill for the truth, it will die for it. If Jesus is king, he will be a suffering king. He will not demand ransom. He will be ransom. He will win, not by spilling the blood of others, but by offering up his own.”***

Perhaps the best way to understand the kingship of Christ is by way of paradox. With paradox, we can get closer to the truth, because the Christian claim is that Jesus is and isn't a king. He is the One who, when the crowds clamored to

make him king, he disappeared from their midst. He is descended from King David, yet refuses to amass an army or wield power like David. We call him divine, yet he didn't even want to accept the term when someone called him “good.” He is Savior and Lord, yet he emptied himself on the cross and became a servant to all. He is a king of the heart, soul and spirit; yet his kingdom is not of this world.

A writer once summarized the paradox of Christ the King this way:

- *Christ came not to be served, but to serve.*
- *The Son of God became poor so that we might become rich in spirit.*
- *He emptied himself that we might be filled.*
- *His heart was broken that he might bind up the broken-hearted.*
- *His body was crushed that we might be made whole.*
- *The Lord of lords became a slave to serve the needs of all people.*
- *The King of kings taught us to love our enemies, and to do good to those who treat us badly.*
- *He was rejected that we might be accepted.*
- *He was bruised that we may be healed.*
- *He was condemned that we might be justified.*
- *He was judged that we would not be judged.*
- *He died as the innocent One so that the guilty would receive mercy.***

One of my favorite American folk hymns is “What Wondrous Love Is This?” and it says it better than I ever could:

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
to lay aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
to lay aside his crown for my soul.*

The crown was rightfully his, yet he gave it up voluntarily. For my soul, for your soul – for the heart and soul of the world. He exchanged it for this crown [of thorns], so that a

kingdom of love and truth might one day prevail over violence and deception.

My friends, we're still waiting for that day.

And Jesus is still waiting for us to build that kingdom along with him.

**Information from the Wikipedia articles "Christ the King" and "Feast of Christ the King," accessed Nov. 21, 2009 at <http://en.wikipedia.org/> Quote is from Cyril of Alexandria, used in Pius XI's encyclical of 1925.*

***"The King's Standard," 1996, St. Louis University. Web location: http://liturgy.slu.edu/ChristKingB112209/theword_encountered.html (accessed 11-21-09).*

****Adapted from a longer list by Dr. Anthony Fortosis, quoted in Prokope, November/December, 1992, p. 4*