

Christ the King – 29 October 2023

“Jesus answered: ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence.’”

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son...

Students of the liturgy will note a couple of things about the feast we celebrate today. The most obvious, in case you have tried to follow the readings in your Book of Common Prayer, is that you will not find this feast included in your prayer book. In case you were bound and determined to find the Gospel chosen for today, the only place you will find it is included in the somewhat-lengthy Passion Gospel chosen for Good Friday. As a former choral scholar at Nashotah House, I am intimately acquainted with this lection because we chanted it every Holy Week. Yet here we are at the end of October celebrating a feast which seems to be without history and without connection to what is going on in the liturgical kalendar around it. A little history is in order:

The reason you will not find the feast in our Prayer Book is because it was not added to the kalendar until relatively recently: Pius IX placed it on this Sunday, the last Sunday before All Saints' Day, in 1925. It was largely in response to both the spreading nationalism and secularism that was gripping Europe, and eventually gave rise to the fascism prevalent from the end of World War I through the Cold War. Pius IX had a good idea, in theory, even if not everyone else was quick to add the feast to their own kalendars. To confuse you even more, although I promise you that is not my intention, when the Roman Church "revised" their kalendar following the 2nd Vatican Council, the Feast was moved to the end of the liturgical year, what we call the Sunday Next before Advent. So if you tell your Roman Catholic friends and neighbors that we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King today, they will look at you in bewilderment and wonder why we seem to be a month early. Nevertheless, it is our provincial feast day, that is, the name to which our jurisdiction, the Province of Christ the King is dedicated.

It is funny to me that this feast is so new on the kalendar. When I read the sermons of others published in books or online, no one of any church

affiliation seems to want to emphasize the kingship of Christ. Indeed, in some more progressive circles this feast is referred to as the “Reign of Christ”, presumably in an effort to save some the offense of thinking of Christ as male, or at least, not as a king. The emphasis is on Christ being our Saviour, our brother, our friend. As a child in the Methodist Church one of my favorite hymns I remember singing had the first line, “Lord Jesus I love Thee, I know thou art mine.” The hymn still exists, but in most places is now, “My Jesus, I love Thee.”

I am not opposed to anyone thinking of Jesus as one’s brother, Saviour or friend. A personal relationship with Jesus is as important as any Sacrament. But what is our opposition to thinking of Jesus as our King? Did Pius IX get it totally wrong? I don’t think so.

Pius IX lived in a world where there were more kings leading countries than we have now. And some of those kings, or whatever title you wish to give them, were believed to have supernatural powers. Think of Emperor Hirohito of Japan. There were Japanese people who literally believed that Japan could not lose World War II because their leader was a god. It is safe to say that there

were those in Italy and Germany at the same time who held their leaders at god or near-god status.

So then, the question for us, is Christ a king? Let's go back to where else I said you would find this Gospel I just read this morning: Good Friday. The snippet read this morning stops before it gets gruesome, but I ask rhetorically, what happens next? At the end of the sham trial, Christ is crucified on a cross. Not a very kingly end, is it? We have visions of kings at the end of their earthly lives in large palaces, surrounded by their families and the best doctors in the land. (We are told that Elizabeth II ended her life this way.) But what did the sign that Pilate had nailed to the cross say? On most crucifixes it is an abbreviation of the Latin (INRI) so it is easy to forget: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." As far as we know, those were the only words written about Our Lord during his lifetime. Ironically, Jesus was crucified for not being a king, or at least the kind of king the Jewish people wanted. They didn't want a kind and gentle Jesus who would sit down on the grass with animals (think St. Francis) or play the harp to pass the time (think King David). They wanted a political or military ruler who was going to march into town like he owned the place and

show those detestable Romans who was boss. "I'm the king," they wanted him to roar. "Not that imposter Caesar. I represent the beginning and the end. I am the Alpha and Omega." In modern parlance, "there's the door; don't let it hit your backside on the way out!" But that didn't happen. Well, the first part did: Christ came with great triumph into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week. We mark this with a procession around the church (in some places) with the glorious hymn "All Glory Laud and Honor." And then with as much memory as the American electorate, a few days later people in the same town which was celebrating this triumphal entry wanted Him crucified. Figure that one out!

So, let's put ourselves at the foot of the cross, 2,000 years ago. After a victim of crucifixion has suffered enough, the soldiers would go and break the legs of the victim. Without one's legs to support the internal organs, one would suffocate and die. The death of crucifixion did not come from bleeding to death. But when the soldiers went to break Jesus' legs, they found that he was already dead, and so one of him pierced his side. From that wound came forth blood and water. This water signifies the cleansing of us that would not be possible without the death of Christ. Yes, we have to be baptized. Yes, we

have to confess our sins on an on-going basis. Yes, we have to avail ourselves to the Sacraments and toil through all that life throws at us, but none of that would be possible without the death of Christ on the cross. He was tortured, he was made fun of, he was insulted, but what was one of the last things He heard? One of the thieves on a cross next to Him said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He got it. The brightest and best the temple had to offer could not see past the ends of their respective noses, but a common, ordinary, guilty (remember, one thief said to the other that they deserved what they got but Jesus suffered through no fault of His own) criminal saw that day what so many in our world still yearn to find: the King of Kings.

Historically, what does a king do? He protects his subjects and provides an economy where they can prosper and pay lots of taxes right? (One could argue the basic form of government has not changed much in thousands of years!) He gives them a life, of sorts. We can argue about the quality of that life throughout history, but that is for another occasion. What did Christ give to us? Both our humanity, but also our eternal life. Not just to pay taxes, or so we

could provide young, strong men to go to war, but, to quote the Epistle lesson from this morning, “to be partakers of the inheritance of the Saints in light.”

Remember what Christ told that thief on the cross? “Today you will be with me in paradise.” When have you gotten a promise like that from an American politician?

The power of Christ’s death {and the coming resurrection} shined forth through the water from the side of Christ that very dark Good Friday. May His glory likewise shine through us, that we might bear witness to the truth in His stead, and that everyone in all the nations of the world might hear His voice and be citizens of the only kingdom that matters.

+In the Name...