

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King
November 24, 2019
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Jeremiah 23:1-6
Canticle 16: Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79)
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

You may have come to church this morning imagining – possibly hoping – we would celebrate Thanksgiving today. If so, you’re probably surprised – perhaps disappointed – that, after this morning’s gospel, it feels like Good Friday.

Thanksgiving is, at least in the U.S., the more traditional holiday. The Feast of Christ the King, as today is known, is a relatively modern liturgical innovation. It wasn’t in the old 1928 Prayer Book; we added it to our calendar in the 1970s.

Pope Pius XI first instituted it in a 1925 encyclical (and then it was the last Sunday in October, only moved to the last Sunday before Advent in 1960). After the horrors of World War I, the pope denounced the deplorable rise in class divisions. He feared the unbridled nationalism of despots such as Lenin in the new Soviet Union, and Mussolini in Italy, and Hitler in Germany. (Rightly so, it turned out.) True peace, he believed, could not be founded by any tyrant, nor could it be established by any political regime or economic system.

The Feast of Christ the King, as he imagined it, would stand as a reminder to all Christians that we owe allegiance to Jesus over any pretender – any king or prime minister or president or any political party or economic system ... we owe allegiance to Jesus over any despot or tyrant. That’s the wisdom of this day.

So we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King today. There’s a regal-looking figure for the cover of our bulletins this morning. Our opening prayer acclaim Jesus as “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Our readings all speak of the kind of leaders worthy of their titles. The first reading, from Jeremiah, offers a lament, even as it holds on for a promise. In the imagery of his day, as shepherds care for flocks, so, too, rulers ruled to ensure the wellbeing of the people. “Woe to shepherds” who fail in this sacred duty, who fleece their subjects for personal gain, Jeremiah says, and then the prophet promises that God will “raise up” a king who will be wise, a ruler who will execute “justice and righteousness in the land.”

In response to that reading, we sing a canticle this morning: “The Song of Zechariah.” It was sung, as Luke tells it, by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist at his birth. The song declares that John will prepare the way for the one raised up by God, the one who “would save us from our enemies ... [and] set us free.” That reading from Colossians is most likely a song all on its own, an early Christian hymn that sings of Jesus as the fulfillment of all God’s promises.

But then there's today's gospel: Christ – the King – on a cross.

This is no king in any ordinary sense of the word.

But Jesus is king even here. Everybody says so. As Jesus hangs upon a cross, even the inscription carved into the cross above his head declares: "This is the king of the Jews." The leaders and the soldiers are insincere, of course. They scoff. They mock. They deride. This execution of Jesus is, in their imagination, the end of any claims he might make. As one commentator puts it:

The taunting of the leaders, soldiers and the one criminal ... are all part of the humiliation of Jesus that is intended not only to kill him physically, but to also kill him "inspirationally." That is, to make sure that all hopes and dreams that the crowds had begun to place in Jesus were also terminated. This will be a shameful death; an excruciating death; a degrading death ...

Jesus ... will not have a parable or question that will only further embarrass them; further prove their powerlessness before him. They are demonstrating **THEIR** power and authority is now **THE** power and authority, and folks had better start paying attention to what **THEY** say, and forget about this Jesus fellow.

The sign over Jesus' head might just as well have said:

*Look what we did to Jesus
Imagine what we will do to you* ⁱ

Christ the King? This is an execution, not a coronation. This is not a triumphant sovereign taking his rightful place on a throne, but a convicted criminal being mocked for his impotence. Winners are not lifted high on a cross; this is where losers go to die. In all that they said and did that day, the message was clear: "forget about this fellow Jesus."

But of course the soldiers and all the power of Rome misses the point, even as they wrongly judge, convict, and execute Jesus. The rulers, the soldiers, along with one of the criminals on a cross next to him, berate Jesus for not saving himself. But he never set out to save himself. And he never set out to rule over others. The highest office in life, Jesus insisted, was not lord but servant; the highest calling not to command but to love.

And so, from the beginning of this morning's gospel, Jesus does not vow vengeance or violence or retribution even on those who execute him, but instead offers forgiveness.

Indeed, from the beginning of the gospel, it should have been clear to us that Jesus would be different. As we will recall exactly one month from today, Jesus was never going to impress people with his wealth or his status or his strength. Jesus was born in dire circumstances, to parents who could not provide for him or protect him. This "good news" was announced to dirty shepherds, keeping watch over a flock of mangy sheep. That's the Christmas story.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, he refused to call upon the power of God for his own comfort or security or prestige. He had no room for vengeance or posturing or vindicating himself or proving anything to anyone. He did not live to be right, but to do right. He made room for the weak and the poor, for women and children, for prostitutes and sinners, for beggars and lepers. Jesus invested himself in them and said God's care was for them. In all that he said and did, Jesus liberated God from the chains of those in charge of social structures and religious order. He insisted that God isn't really interested in all that impresses the rich and powerful: not in wealth or status or virtue or might or winning or strength.

And as he lived, so Jesus died. That's the conclusion of John Shea:

The death of Jesus makes clear his integrity. What he said and what he did were of one piece. He did not seek out death; but he died as ... one who valued God's will more than he valued his own life. He taught and lived a nonviolent way of life, holding forgiveness and reconciliation to be absolute values that had to be followed at all costs. When pressure was brought against him to abandon those values and use whatever powers he had to protect himself and defeat his attackers, he refused to do so. He died as he lived. This simple yet profound integrity lifts him above others and recommends his revelation of a forgiving God as truthful. ⁱⁱ

The cultural meanings attached to titles do not rule over Jesus. The person of Jesus – in his life and in his death – transforms the inherited meanings of all titles. What does it mean to be a rabbi, a teacher, a lord, a king?

“Forget about this Jesus fellow”? No, remember him well.

Down through the ages, there have been a few earthly rulers who have taken this all in. This past Wednesday, we told the story of Edmund, a 9th century king in East Anglia (part of what is now larger England). Vikings were a scourge on the country. And they offered Edmund a deal, a way to save himself. They wanted to make him a figurehead king, but he refused. They offered him wealth, asking that he abandon his faith and his people, but he refused. His bishops advised to accept the deal, but he refused.

And for that refusal, his captors beat him with cudgels, they tied him to a tree and whipped him, their archers made target practice of him, and finally they beheaded him. We regard him a saint today.

As I told his story this past Wednesday, I remembered the story of Alphege, an 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury. He, too, was taken captive by Vikings. They wanted to hold him for a ransom, but even as the people took up a collection to save him, he refused to allow an “already over-burdened” people to pay it. And the tale of his execution is even more gruesome than that of Edmund. He, too, is counted among the saints of God.

This past Tuesday, the Vestry and I recalled the story of Elizabeth, a 13th century princess of Hungary. She was not beset by Vikings, but by poverty and sickness. Her generosity to the sick and the poor was a scandal among her peers. She died young, essentially cast out from civilized society. We call her a saint, as well.

Down through the ages, the saints of God (at least those we would deem saints) have been – as Jesus was in his lifetime – the exceptions: wreckless, foolish, scandals. They all patterned their lives after the example of Jesus, Christ the King, not settling for any conventional norms.

Rome imagined that it could kill Jesus and that the people would pay attention to a show of brute force and forget the man nailed to a tree. The power of Rome notwithstanding, the people did not forget Jesus. The people remembered him, they repeated his words, they made him incarnate in their lives ... and, on a few extraordinary occasions, in their deaths as well.

“Jesus refused to let Rome crush the humanity or the divinity out of him.”

That’s why we celebrate this feast day today, Jesus as the antithesis of kings and tyrants down through the ages. Jesus – Christ the King – commandeers any commander-in-chief, presides over any president, subverts every sovereign, and triumphs over any tyrant.

We give thanks this Thanksgiving weekend for the preciousness of our lives. Don’t misunderstand the point of it all: the point of all this is not to disparage the gift of life. The point is to come to see the value of a life well lived, not merely for oneself but for all people and the world in which we live. The point is to give thanks in our daily living to the true source of all that is good in this world and to refuse all that is so terribly wrong with it.

Jesus is our King, but he does not “lord” it over us. He does not so much tell us what to do as show us how to live.

ⁱ David Ewart @ <https://www.holytextures.com/2010/10/luke-23-33-43-year-c-pentecost-november-20-november-26-reign-christ-king-proper-29-ordinary-time-34-sermon.html>.

ⁱⁱ John Shea, “Testing Life by Dying,” in in *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C: The Relentless Widow* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2006), p. 325