

SERMON

The Feast of Christ the King – Year C- Nov. 20, 2022

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“Today you will be with me in Paradise,” Jesus promises the thief, but “today” in Luke’s Gospel is not merely a 24 hour interval, but the moment when God’s salvation fractures time. Patrick J. Wilson, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King with scripture readings that reflect what many would imagine to be the role and function of a King. The Epistle selection is filled with rich images and a concept of a God who strengthens the people who believe; providing them with all that is necessary to endure in faith.

The Psalm reminds us that in all things we are to trust in God, who is our hope and our help always. Our God, knowing us intimately, our joys and our sorrows, continues to love and care for us. In moments of fear and confusion, God is there for us when we “Be still, and know that I am God.” With confidence in God’s love and direction, we are encouraged to hope and trust in our God of grace and providence.

This feast has special significance for me, though, as it was on this day that I made my First Communion as a child in the Roman Catholic tradition. I still recall being taught why this feast was instituted in the Roman calendar by Pius XI in 1925. Fascism was on the rise in Europe. The people of the world in that time had

removed the Christ from their lives and holy law no longer held a place in public affairs or politics. This feast was to provide the faithful and all people of the world the opportunity to recognize the power and majesty of the Lord and to re-commit their lives to Him and to the message of social justice preached in the Gospels.

But if this is the purpose of this feast, why are we listening to a Gospel that tells the crucifixion story? The common image of splendor and grandeur associated with royalty is extinguished in this Gospel by the image of a man who has been tortured and is in the throes of an agonizing death on a cross. Rome used crucifixion as a means of public shaming and social control. While the inscription on the cross above Jesus' head read, "this is the King of the Jews," it was an irony. Crucifixion was only used to execute the lower classes and those who were not Roman citizens. It was an act of public humiliation. Crucifixion was torture to teach civil obedience. Resist Rome and you will have life crushed out of you.

Why not a more majestic scene...the heavens opening, the Father's voice, or Jesus ascending through the clouds at least? Perhaps Jesus' idea of kingdom is different. A kingdom here on earth brings to mind geographic boundaries, struggles to maintain power and control, competition. Jesus taught, not the regime change hoped for by the Jewish people of His time, but a different way of being in relationship with each other and with God. Jesus offers us, not a change in who governs us, but in the way we govern our lives with one another.

In this Gospel account, we meet Jesus crucified, dying between two criminals. The image of these two criminals, each on a different side of Jesus, provides a stark visualization of the contrast in reactions to Jesus' message. Some will understand and embrace it; others will mock and reject it. The one criminal joins in the taunting of Jesus with the soldiers. The other asks humbly to be remembered when Jesus comes into His kingdom. Jesus promises "the Good Thief" that today he will be with Him in paradise. This promise establishes Jesus' authority, His sovereignty. By His death and resurrection, Jesus is vindicated and affirmed as Messiah. But not as a Ruler who assures His power through war, condemnation and execution but who reigns with mercy and compassion. Jesus as Messiah or King brings into the world God's righteous reign of justice with mercy.

We are to follow this example of justice with mercy and unconditional welcome to provide relief to those who suffer, to embrace all and forgive all. As Jesus recognized and sought to relieve the suffering of the thief dying beside Him, we are to do the same in others' lives; to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed and marginalized by speaking truth to power. We, as His followers, must be the force for everything that is good and to work to change unjust structures.

If we consider the crucifixion story using this lens, it is perhaps the most appropriate selection for Christ the King Sunday. In the crucifixion, the actions of

the civil and religious establishment authorities work into God's story as it allows people on the margins, like the two thieves, the Roman centurion, to testify to the truth. In calling into question through His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God, it sets the stage for Christians throughout the centuries to ask what type of King Jesus really is. It allows us to ask a more personal question as followers today: what kind of church should we be today?

We, the followers of Jesus today, need to show up. We need to show up at gatherings of public worship, we need to show up to welcome, Aidan and Colton, as they are baptized and become the newest members of the Body of Christ. But as we participate in our rituals of faith, we also need to participate in actions that create change in our legal, social and economic structures.

As we approach the season of Advent (next Sunday is Advent 1), the season of light returning and shattering the darkness, we must be that light in a world which for many has become dark, disheartening and perhaps even frightening. We must examine our beliefs about race, white supremacy, class, gender and gender identity, ethnicity, nationality and religious beliefs. Without examining such beliefs we can't hope to create structural change which perpetuates inequity in so many of our social, legal and economic structures but most glaringly in our justice, medical and education systems. We must bring light by our words and actions to those who are now vilified and threatened with violence particularly for the color

of their skin, their immigration status or for whom they love. We must shed a bright light, the light of Christ, to expel ignorance and injustice and to set Christ's kingdom aglow with hope for all! Now is our opportunity to truly be Christ's hands, feet and words in the world by showing that we will stand in solidarity with all those who are marginalized and oppressed because our King, sat not on a throne in glory while in this world, but died, as a criminal and political prisoner, for speaking out and taking action against the suffering he saw in the form of evil, empire and totalitarianism.

Commit yourself to follow the Christ! Be the light that shines on in the darkness! Go make a difference in the world!

AMEN!