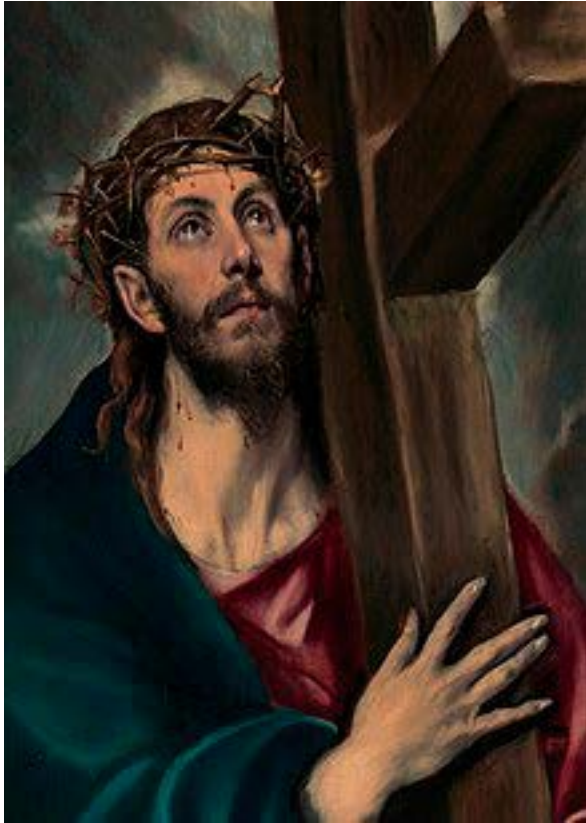


Novemeber 20, 2022

The Last Sunday in Pentecost

The Rev. Kristian Kohler
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Christ the King



*Jesus, remember us, when you come into your kingdom.
Amen.*

This is the prayer of the so-called “penitent thief” on a cross next to Jesus.

You might be wondering, what in the world are we doing reading about the crucifixion in November, on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, so far removed from Holy Week and Good Friday?

To answer that question, I want to begin by backing up and providing you with a bit of liturgical history about today’s celebration of Christ the King, also referred to as the Reign of Christ.

This capstone of the church’s liturgical year wasn’t celebrated as a special day until 1925. It is, in fact, one of our newest liturgical celebrations. In that year, Pope Pius XI established what was called the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. Originally celebrated on the last Sunday of October (to counteract Protestant celebrations of the Reformation), this feast was later moved to the final Sunday of the church year. But more important than the date on which it is celebrated is the reason behind the institution of this festival. In 1925, the world was still recovering from the devastation of World War I. Nationalism, fascism, and militarism were on the rise, and industries and economies were booming. But Pope Pius XI feared that Christians were forgetting where true power and glory were to be found — in Christ, on the cross, and in the in-breaking of God’s kingdom into our world. And so today, like every Sunday, we celebrate Christ, but with a particular emphasis: today we celebrate Christ as Sovereign and we remember what God’s kingdom is all about. We remember in whom we put our ultimate trust and allegiance, and for what is our greatest hope: namely, that Christ’s reign and rule would come here on earth, in our lives, and in our hearts.

This might be a bit of a cult insider reference, but I know for a fact that some of you have seen and very much enjoyed

the Netflix hit series called *The Crown*. Who here has seen *The Crown*? Well, the first four seasons are fantastic. The fifth and final season just came out on November 9, but I've been waiting to watch it in December in Arizona with my mom. *The Crown* chronicles the various decades of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, of blessed memory. In 1936, her uncle Edward VIII became king but then abdicated not soon after, passing the crown on to Elizabeth's father, George VI. George would pass away in 1952, and in 1953 Queen Elizabeth's coronation took place in Westminster Abbey. I think my favorite scene from the entire series is Elizabeth's coronation. It has all the grandeur and pageantry you would expect from one of the world's oldest monarchies. At the climax of the service, Elizabeth was seated on the Coronation Chair, which dates to the year 1296. Using holy chrism oil, the same oil we use for baptisms, confirmations, and ordinations, the Archbishop of Canterbury anointed Elizabeth's hands, chest, and head. She was then clothed in the Royal Robe, the Royal Stole, and the Imperial Mantle made of silk and gold. Finally, she received a ring, gloves, an orb, and sceptres before being crowned. The second the crown touched her head, all present shouted "God Save the Queen," cannons were fired, bells were rung, and the Queen was enthroned on her throne chair by the Archbishop. The service then concluded with Holy Communion. This is what a monarch looks like, right?

So we're told. So we're told by history, by fairytales, by empire, by legends. But, in contrast, we get quite a different description of Jesus' exaltation in today's reading from the Gospel According to Luke. The setting is not the grandeur of a gothic church but rather a hill known as The Skull. Instead of seating him on a throne, there they crucified Jesus with two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Rather than clothe him in silk and gold, they cast lots for his clothing. Rather than the crown of St. Edward the Confessor, the other gospels record that Jesus was crowned with a crown of thorns and handed a reed instead of a royal scepter. The people and soldiers mocked him and brought him sour wine. An inscription over him read, "This is the King of the Jews."

What Jesus actually does on the cross might say the most

about what his reign looks like. First, he asks forgiveness for those who crucified him. And before he breathes his last, he promises criminals forgiveness as well. On the cross, we see Christ as a King, but in total contrast to what we normally think of as kingly and queenly glory and power. We see strength made perfect in weakness. We see sacrificial love, forgiveness, and mercy.

Another thing about monarchs is that they often have many titles, and in our lesson from Colossians this morning we are given some more language about Christ as King: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." This hymn as it is often called describes Christ as our king of glory and king of peace. It reminds us that we see the glory of God not in earthly empire and power, but on the cross.

Here in the United States, we are not many days removed from the 2022 midterm elections. We've already started to hear announcements and promises related to the 2024 presidential elections, such as promises to "make America great and glorious again." Not just great, but "great and glorious." When I heard this pronouncement this past week, as a good Lutheran all I could think of was Luther's theology of the cross, which he contrasts with a theology of glory. You might remember me discussing this theology of the cross last year during Holy Week on Good Friday itself. If you need a refresher, I'll remind you what Luther says in his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. He writes in thesis 20: "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." In other words, a theology of the cross is one that sees God revealed in suffering, in

sacrificial love, in forgiveness, and in mercy. A theology of glory revels in earthly power and celebrates politicians and monarchs, empires and militaries. A theology of the cross points us to the reign of Christ, which is revealed in weakness and humility. Contrasting a theology of glory with a theology of the cross necessarily makes us ask the question again, in what and in whom do we put our ultimate trust and allegiance? Do we place our hope in promises of earthly power and vainglory, even in the evil of Christian Nationalism, or do we glory in the cross of Christ?

Today is a day of contrasts. We like to think we know what glory and power look like. We celebrate earthly rulers and states with great pomp and circumstance, silk and gold, wealth and military might on display. And we probably enjoy all those fancy things! But God shows us what true glory and power look like: on the cross, in suffering, in servant love, in mercy and forgiveness, even promising a criminal a place in the kingdom. This is Christ, our king, whom we worship and adore.

We are asked to commit ourselves to so much in our lives. School groups for students and parents, church committees, sports teams, political candidates, civic groups, social concerns, the list goes on and on. Last week, we even asked each of you to commit your time, talent, and treasure to the work and mission of our congregation. We are constantly asked for commitment and even allegiance to so many things. And none of that is inherently bad. But we need to keep those things in their place. We need to keep them in perspective. Ultimately, we are called to keep our King Jesus Christ and God's kingdom first in our hearts. We are to love and serve God in Christ above all other powers, and we are to pray without ceasing for God's kingdom to come here on earth, in our lives, and in our hearts.

I leave you to ponder today this quote from theologian Samuel Torvend: "This Jesus whom this Sunday praises as king, is, in fact, like no other king that has ever reigned. For today, the gospel, and the holy meal proclaim him king where we least expect it: in the depth of our yearning for life, our suffering, and our need. And in this he is no ordinary king. Here in our struggle and desire to be witnesses to his

life and his love for us, he reigns. And here in the world, hidden in the struggle for justice and peace, here he reigns."

Blessed be God, and blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen

