Christ the King

November 24, 2024

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is a feast first celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Pius XI established Christ the King Sunday in 1925 to counter what he regarded as the destructive forces of the modern world: secularism in the west and the rise of communism in Russia and fascism in Italy and Spain. These were the forerunners of the Nazism soon to seize Germany. Pope Pius intended to highlight the rule of Christ as opposed to dictatorship and Nazism. By intention or coincidence, the festival of Christ the King also landed on the last Sunday in October, coinciding with the Protestant celebration of the Reformation. It was eventually moved to the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar. The feast is unofficially celebrated in some Episcopal parishes, mostly Anglo-Catholic parishes like ours. It is not mentioned in the Episcopal calendar of the church year yet the readings for today-The Last Sunday after Pentecost-or Christ the King Sunday -celebrate Christ's messianic kingship and sovereign rule over all creation.

Celebrating Christ, the King is the end of the church calendar year. It is the ending of Year B in the church year and next week starts the beginning of Year C. This Sunday stands at the end of the long season after Pentecost as a summing up of what we’ve learned about Jesus Christ, and as an introduction to Advent.

The themes of the original Christ the King taught by Pius XI linger on. The last judgment is not just a judgment on individuals; it is also a judgment on human history. The dialogue between Pontius Pilate and Jesus Christ in John 18 demonstrates the struggle between the kingdoms and republics of this world, on the one hand, and the kingdom of God and of his Christ, on the other. This gospel reading, though not directly about Christ’s second coming, confronts us with political claims for which we will all be answerable. To which kingdom (or republic) do we owe our ultimate allegiance? What do our actions and attitudes say about where we stand? To answer these questions, we can examine the ideas of kingdoms, personal freedom, and living in truth.

The idea of a kingdom may seem foreign to us Americans. We have a republic in a democratic society. Why do we call Christ king in the first place? Some people think we should throw out the word “king” as a relic of an old, oppressive era, but that is sadly ironic, because in that mystery of Christ’s kinship is the root of our liberation. Thinking of Christ as king can be helpful to us. Kings are born into their role. Christ is King because he is the Son of God. Kings are not elected. Christ is both perfect human and perfect God, and because he is God, he is ruler of all that is; sole ruler because God is one. Christ the King-The One on the throne is the Lamb who was slain. Self-giving love, unity, and truth is the agenda throughout his dominion.

This can be hard for us living in a democratic society where we place a high value on freedoms and autonomy. Christ came to free us from sin and death. But with that freedom we become his subjects. That means we choose Christ over personal autonomy. Now before we all start feeling bristly about our personal freedoms and autonomies consider this-Do we value personal freedoms over Christ? Was it more important for Christ to do his own thing-to be independent or to follow the will of the father? Think about that for a moment. What about us? Following Christ means we give up our *own freedoms* to do **His** will. His will includes self-sacrifice, seeking truth, and loving all of creation.

Julien C.H. Smith from Valparaiso University in his article “Paul’s Prescription for a Polarized Church”, says that our democratic notion of personal freedom as the highest good can cause divisions in the church. He says that the idea that if we are not causing harm to a neighbor or their property then we can pursue our own interests as we like-this is not the radical idea of hospitality and love that Christ taught.

We are to welcome and serve others not to please ourselves. We are Not to just tolerate others we are to bear with them and to support them. The strong support the weak. The Strong are those who can help given their resources or their talents. We give up our own intentions for others. This isn’t just those with money giving to charity. It’s all of us; young, old, rich, poor. Everyday. It takes on many forms.

Our freedom does not come *before* Christ. It comes from Christ. We are free in Christ to live a new way of life, a life of peace, truth, righteousness and joy. We are free to love our neighbor.

If personal freedom is seen as the highest good, division occurs. People unite with others to protect their interests seeking power in a majority rule. Christ promotes unity over division. The apostle Paul likens Christians to household servants. We all serve the same master so we cannot judge each other. We do not know the mind of God and we cannot have an us versus them mentality. God is above our divisions.

In John’s gospel today Jesus says, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice”.

Truth as named by Jesus has several parts. Jesus testifies to the truth by revealing the nature of God through his life, death, and resurrection. Another part of truth is seeing situations clearly in the world around us and ourselves. Examining our own beliefs and actions regularly through conversations and community with others NOT like us help us to see our truth. When we see ourselves clearly then we can see our faults and mistakes. We can repent and ask for forgiveness.

On this Feast of Christ the King, we bow in awe and worship, to the One who reveals the truth of God, to the one who frees us from our own intentions so that we can seek and find truth so that we can love and serve God and others. Amen.