

Christ The King – November 22, 2020

Good morning, beloved friends in Christ. It is a joy to speak to you on this Feast where we celebrate the Kingship of Christ. This last Sunday of Ordinary Time set apart to acknowledge the role of Jesus in the lives of Christians who follow him. Ruler, Sovereign, King.

There are some for whom this language of Kingship harkens back to an historical time when the rule of Monarchs was the presumed form of government. I am one! It's language that makes some increasingly uncomfortable with images of a patriarchal system of domination, purely anti-democratic, for many a tyrannical imposition of power and authority granted by Divine Right to those who wield it.

For me, while I understand the impulse to drift farther and farther away from these models of power and authority as descriptive of the way that God in Christ exercises power, I'd like to speak this morning about the way that Jesus turns Kingship on its head. In fact, in a time when we are confronted almost daily with the authoritarian impulses of those who hold power and the levers of government – in places both far and, also, too close for comfort – Jesus is a model of the UN-King. His teaching, life, and witness actually subvert the power of Kingship.

When I say that Jesus is an Un-King, I am not merely saying he is not a King. Rather, he is the King who subverts Kingship. He's not simply the opposite of a King, but rather he transcends and excludes Kingship. And just as in the past

decades, the Church has moved away from seeing our relationship to the Creation as one of dominion and exploitation to a vision of stewardship and care, so too – I believe – the Church must begin to address Imperial power and domination in relation to one another and follow the example of the King who doesn't call us servants but friends.

As we see in the Gospels, Christ's Kingship is inconsistent with traditional structures of power; and for this reason, Jesus tells Pilate that "***My kingdom is not from this world.***" In likewise, in today's Gospel, we will here Jesus equate himself explicitly with the hungry, the thirsty, those who are strangers, or naked and vulnerable, or sick, or imprisoned. Not exactly images of the stately King in power and majesty, but rather a King who is both pauper and prince, outcast and other.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, when he is raised from the dead and is set by the Almighty at God's right hand, take note that Christ is not set in the place of power and authority, but, as the Scriptures will tell us, as place "***far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.***" This isn't meant to imply that Christ has MORE power, but again — that the kind of power and rule and authority of Christ is different. That it supersedes previous notions of these things and turns them on their heads.

If you're not sure about Jesus' understanding of authority, one need look no further than the temptations in the wilderness when he is offered political, economic, and religious power over the world and declines all of them. Not exactly a model for kingly authority! He rebukes the model of power and

domination that the world has to offer in clear and unambiguous terms. And he teaches his disciples that while ***“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them...it shall not be so with you.”*** How then, shall we imagine, that even in his glory, Christ will do anything other than reject the power of Kingship as we understand it. Rather he subverts it as the Un-King who rules like a servant over an Un-kingdom of those called to love and serve rather than exercise power over one another.

The writer of Ephesians understood this, for later in the letter we hear that ***“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world...”*** And this, by implication, suggests that like Christ, we are to reject power and dominion over others. And our stance towards rulers and their authority is intended to be one of antagonism and suspicion. Again, remember ***“...it shall not be so with you.”***

Today’s Gospel – in its separation of sheep and goats, or rather its implicit determination about who is faithful and *how* to the UN-kingdom of Christ, is really focused on hospitality. Giving food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick and imprisoned...these are acts of hospitality and acts that destroy the boundaries between those of us who have enough and those who have little or nothing. They equalize power relationships with care and compassion.

We are essentially People of the Table. The entire posture of our way of life as “church” is summarized by the table at which we gather in mutuality and respect with our neighbors. It is the place where we welcome outsiders. But hospitality, by definition, is practiced with strangers. The very origin of the word hails from the Latin root that means “stranger” or “guest.” And yet, it isn’t merely about welcoming the stranger. But about equalizing the relationship between the guest and the host! This is the ancient sense of hospitality. At the table, we are called to welcome strangers, wash their feet, offer food and wine and only then, after the guest was comfortable – ask the stranger’s name.

The table is the symbol of love, equality, care, and mutuality – the very hallmarks of our Christ the UN-King. In Jesus’ Gospel words today, we go from the ancient myth of the Greek world of “entertaining Zeus” to believing that every stranger we entertain is the same as entertaining Jesus. ***“Whatever you did to the least of these, you did for me.”***

But far more than simply attending to basic needs, hospitality at God’s table is about destroying the inequities that make such attention necessary. Around the common table, prejudices, judgments, and inequities are to come undone. This kind of hospitality is revolutionary. It refuses to accept the status quo. It moves beyond mere charity, and creates space for enemies to live as family, strangers to live as friends. It challenges the assumption that some are more important than others. Host and guest alike. Celebrity and hierarchy and power over others is undone!

Hospitality becomes revolutionary when the line between the host and the guest, the owner and the dispossessed, the master and the slave, the privileged and the marginalized get so blurred that we can finally begin to redefine our social relations in the way of Jesus Christ. The UN-king who rules over an Unkingdom where power and authority are transcended by a new vision of what community looks like.

Before I close, I leave you with the words of Anglican priest and poet Malcolm Guite. His poem Christ the King captures the irony of Jesus as our UN-king, based on today's Gospel:

Our King is calling from the hungry furrows
Whilst we are cruising through the aisles of plenty,
Our hoardings screen us from the man of sorrows,
Our soundtracks drown his murmur: 'I am thirsty'.
He stands in line to sign in as a stranger
And seek a welcome from the world he made,
We see him only as a threat, a danger,
He asks for clothes, we strip-search him instead.
And if he should fall sick then we take care
That he does not infect our private health,
We lock him in the prisons of our fear
Lest he unlock the prison of our wealth.
But still on Sunday we shall stand and sing
The praises of our hidden Lord and King.
AMEN.