

## Honoring Christ as King

Today is the last Sunday of our liturgical year, and the last time we'll journey through the Gospel of Luke for a while. It's also Christ the King Sunday. The Feast of Christ the King – or, as some Catholics call it, the Solemnity of Christ the King – has an antique ring to it, as though it's been part of Christian worship for centuries. In fact, though, it's a very recent addition to Christian tradition. Christ the King Sunday was originally instituted by Pope Pius XI in his 1925 encyclical *Quas Primas*, and was first celebrated on the last Sunday in October. The feast wasn't moved to the last Sunday before Advent until 1970, and wasn't even referenced in the Book of Common Prayer until the 1979 edition.

The Episcopal Church's religious practices are based on a "three-legged stool" of Scripture, reason and tradition. We tend to like best the things we've done the longest, and we're notoriously suspicious of anything that comes from outside our community. Given its Roman roots and relatively recent creation, Christ the King Sunday might not seem like an obvious addition to our worship. It's not on the official Episcopalian calendar of the church year, and many Episcopalians don't celebrate it at all.

However, it makes sense for us to join our Catholic and Lutheran cousins in celebrating Christ the King Sunday if we consider why Pope Pius XI established the feast in the first place. In 1925, secularism, totalitarianism, militarism, and atheism were on the rise in parts of Europe, Russia and elsewhere, threatening not only the Catholic Church, but civilization itself. To quote the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Pope Pius XI's encyclical gave Catholics hope and—while governments around them crumbled—the assurance that Christ the King shall reign forever." As Pius wrote, it is not only that "Christ is to be adored [as God] by angels and men, but that to him as man angels and men are subject, and must recognize his empire; by

reason of the hypostatic union Christ has power over all creatures.” In other words, secular governments may come and go, bringing conflict and confusion with them, but Christ is King of All Creation, eternal and invincible no matter what happens in our transitory, secular world.

A century later, fascism, militarism and secularism are re-emerging in too many places around the world. Hatred and violence are proving once again that they’re remarkably difficult to eradicate. If humanity needed to be reminded of Christ’s sovereignty in 1925, we probably need that reminder just as much right now. But if Christ the King Sunday is intended to emphasize Christ’s divine supremacy over secular conflicts, why choose today’s Gospel passage? Although the details of their accounts differ, Matthew, Luke and John all contain descriptions of our risen LORD, alive and well, appearing in the flesh to his disciples. Isn’t the resurrected Christ, victorious even over death itself, the most compelling image of his absolute sovereignty? Shouldn’t we be reading a passage that revels in his triumphant return?

That certainly isn’t what today’s Gospel portrays. Luke takes us to the place called the Skull, where Jesus is crucified between two thieves. The crowd that once relentlessly hounded him, begging for food and stories and miracles, has withdrawn to a safe distance, watching silently as he suffers. Not everyone is so quiet. Jesus is taunted by the religious and Roman leaders, the soldiers, and even one of the thieves. They mock him, demanding that he save himself if he’s truly the Messiah. Some of them – tradition says the soldiers – cast lots to decide who’ll get the clothes off of his back, which has been whipped raw by Pilate’s thugs. Luke’s simple, dispassionate description makes Jesus’s agony all the more horrifying. The man was already beaten and bloody, nailed to a wooden crossbeam and literally hanging in midair, doomed to die of slow suffocation if his heart didn’t give out first. What possible benefit could any of his tormentors have gotten out of torturing him further? Even conceding that they didn’t

understand who Jesus was, simple human decency should have kept them from hectoring anyone who was in so much pain. In this passage, Jesus seems to have fallen as low as it's possible to go. How can this poor, wounded man possibly be a king?

To answer that question, we need to look past the petty viciousness and gore to focus on Jesus himself. Crucifixion would have made it almost impossible for him to breathe, yet he prays for his tormentors, saying "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing." This quotation is missing from some of the earliest manuscripts, but it's so consistent with other things Jesus said during his ministry and so true to Luke's portrait of him that I believe he probably said it. And, to the thief who humbly asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom, he replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." This is a man who can rise so far above physical agony, the emotional pain of abandonment by his followers and friends, and the spiritual assault of spiteful ridicule that he can pray for those who persecute him. This is a man who can offer comfort to a repentant sinner even when his own suffering is more than most of us could bear. This is a man who refuses to save himself from the cross – even though, as the Son of God, he certainly could have – because he's too busy saving everyone else. The crowd, the leaders, the soldiers, and the unrepentant thief don't recognize him, but the repentant thief does. So does Luke, and so do we. This magnanimous, compassionate, uniquely divine man and god is our LORD, and we do right to celebrate him as King.

This morning, I've accentuated Jesus's physical suffering on the Cross. It can be upsetting to contemplate, but it helps us remember that Jesus is fully human. He isn't an invincible immortal who's only playacting at suffering while being impervious to it. He's a unique blend of divinity and mortality, fully able to relate to everything we endure. Jesus doesn't

reign over us from a regal distance – he stands with us, his limitless compassion and boundless forgiveness blessing us right where we are, here and now.

It can be tempting to think of Jesus as a role model, to try to be as heroic and benevolent as we see him in this morning's Gospel. That sounds like a worthy goal, but it's more than a little prideful and probably more than most of us can realistically manage. If we could all be just like Jesus, there would have been no need for his Passion. The more attainable role model in this passage is probably the man we know as the "good thief," the one who is able to rise above his pain just far enough to rebuke his cynical companion, acknowledge his own crimes, and ask not to be spared from his rightful punishment, but simply to be remembered. This imperfect man is honest enough to admit his own shortcomings and humble enough to accept their consequences. That Jesus promises to take that man with him to Paradise tells me that we don't have to be perfect to be good enough for Christ. Honesty and humility are the qualities to cultivate if we're eager to join him in Heaven.

The powers and principalities of this world do their utmost to make trouble, and some of the damage they do can be pretty distressing. If we believe only in what we see and rely exclusively on our own power to solve the world's problems, we may fail to recognize God at work in the world, just as the scoffers at the place of the Skull failed to recognize Jesus. But if we can humbly and honestly acknowledge our failings, we create room in our hearts and our lives for God's grace to work. And when we stop trying to control everything and, instead, joyfully celebrate Jesus as sovereign ruler of this world and the next, we can live in hope of someday meeting him in Paradise, just as he promised. Hallelujah, Christ is risen. Long live the King! *Amen.*