

Proper 29C “Christ the King”

Psalm 46

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

[*Please be seated*]

When Elizabeth asked me in a September staff meeting if I ever wanted to preach, I was at first taken aback (not least because I am a stutterer) – but then I was honored beyond measure. I thought about it for a few weeks, and then told her I’d like to try it, and that I’d like to start with Christmas Eve, and then perhaps move on to Easter. Joking aside, the first Sunday that popped into my head was this Sunday, the Feast of Christ the King. What we didn’t know then was that this would turn out to be the first Sunday of our Stewardship Campaign, and I do not feel myself qualified to preach on such a topic; so my single words about Stewardship today are these: Christ, our King, *commands* you to listen to the invitation of the Stewardship Committee, and, because he is your king, you *will* consider and give thanks for your many blessings.

Why did I choose this Sunday to preach on? The picture of Christ as a king has always appealed to me, although I am not entirely sure why. Perhaps it is because there is something deep down in me, something sub-verbal and intuitive – at that level where your gut feelings trump all intellectual propositions – to which the image of Christ as a Sovereign Lord, robed in majesty, is attractive, or fascinating.

Intellectually, I am a thorough-going proponent of democracy. I agree with the American founding fathers that democracy is perhaps the best form of government yet devised by mankind. The idea of a monarchy, especially that of a hereditary, absolute monarchy, does not strike my intellect as a reasonable way to rule people. The maxim that “absolute power corrupts absolutely” is one I take to be true; and the usual accoutrements of aristocratic privilege, and the belief in the divine right of kings, that accompany monarchy are anathema to my way of thinking.

And yet, there’s something about a king – even beyond the obviously attractive things like pageantry, pomp and circumstance, and the ceremonial that adorns the idea of monarchy – that captivates my emotions. So I thought I would delve into this aspect a little deeper in light of today’s readings.

Today’s Psalm speaks of God as a refuge, a source of strength, immovable, protective, and a stronghold. Despite some of the bellicose imagery, the Psalm says that “it is God who makes war to cease in all the world.” And notice, it is not “wars,” plural, meaning individual wars, but “war,” singular; *all* war, the very concept of war. There is also a sense of the beautiful in the reference to a river “whose streams make glad the city of God.” This is perhaps a reference to the military advantages of having a river running through a fortified city; but I prefer to see in it the gardens and vegetation within the midst of a city – the tender and growing things, and the birds and animals that they attract, that make the inhabitants glad. All these things are a source of comfort – the picture of a protective ruler, an immovable source of strength and gladness, a font of peace and beauty. The Psalmist concludes with the comforting words, “*Be still, then, and know that I am God.*”

Today's Old Testament Reading refers likewise to comfort, even though in a future sense. Jeremiah, not known as a particularly joyful kind of prophet, essentially says that, though bad things are happening to the flock due to bad shepherds, yet the day is coming when a righteous branch of David – the very picture of kingship to a Jew – will be raised up who will execute justice and thus bring safety. This is talking of hope, of promise, of vindication; and the way it will come about is through God's authority, God's kingship. One could, with the Psalmist, say to the persecuted flock, those same comforting words, "*Be still, then, and know that I am God.*"

Today's Epistle is also essentially about comfort. We as Christians have been "transferred into the kingdom" of Jesus. The author of Colossians ascribes these same kingly traits to Jesus: "The image of the invisible God," the "head of the church," who has "first place in everything." And what is it that Jesus is to bring about with this kingly power? In a word, *peace*. All things are reconciled in him, both in heaven and earth, thus "making peace through the blood of his cross." [pause] "*Be still, then, and know that I am God.*"

Today's Gospel reading is a little bit harder to read, given the theme I am developing, because I initially thought that its inclusion on "Christ the King" was due to the inscription that hangs over Jesus as "King of the Jews," and the taunts and jibes at his apparent inability to save himself. Now, this could make a theme all its own – and Martin Scorsese capitalizes on this moment in his film "The Last Temptation of Christ," where Jesus *does* save himself, *does* come down from the cross, escapes into the wilderness, marries Mary Magdalene, has children by her, and settles down to a normal and distinctly un-Messianic and non-martyr-like life. But then I noticed the brief reference to kingship at the very end of the reading: The thief being crucified alongside Jesus says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." The thief, despite going through the same excruciating pain that Jesus is suffering – in fact, perhaps *because* of this shared experience – recognizes the kingship in Jesus that the soldiers fail to see – a kingship characterized by self-sacrifice, loving suffering for the sake of others, and the ultimate triumph over death. He acknowledges Jesus' kingship, begs to be remembered, and Jesus offers hope, comfort, promise – "Today you will be with me in Paradise." This is the very thing the author of Colossians was saying: Today you are "transferred into the kingdom" of Christ. [pause] And, this is also what the Psalmist was saying: "*Be still, then, and know that I am God.*"

So why does the image of "Christ the King" resonate with me? Perhaps it is, after all, just that I love pageantry and a good show. But the inspiration I am taking from the combined thrust of today's readings is one of comfort due to the confident security one has in an all-powerful ruler who is also all-wise and benevolent. Let's face it, though I support it, democracy can bring a certain amount of chaos and uncertainty with it. It is characterized by politicians having to persuade, cajole – and sometimes deceive or coerce – the electorate to see things their way. It is characterized by struggle – men and women vying with other men and women for control of the levers of government. And it's messy – Winston Churchill aptly described it as 'slightly more than half of the people being right slightly more than half of the time.' Not a very comforting track record! Therefore, it seems something of a comfort to take all authority from this realm of bitter conflict called politics, and place it in the hands of an all-wise and all-loving king or queen, and to know that he or she will make sure that your welfare is being looked after, better than you can do so for yourself. It is, again, the relief of resignation that comes from the words of the Psalmist, "*Be still, then, and know that I am God.*"

Anglo-Catholic worship, which is the tradition most closely associated with St. Andrew's through its history, can be seen as rooted in a mindset that finds great power in the notion of Jesus as a king. Some forms of worship perhaps emphasize Jesus' mildness, his meekness, his niceness. The 17th century Anabaptists and their iconic hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus" spring to mind. But Anglo-Catholics seem to prefer the idea of being the subjects of an awe-inspiring God, robed in splendor. One Anglo-Catholic practice, for instance, is to bow the head briefly at every mention of the Name of Jesus. To me, this is an acknowledgment of the kingship of Christ, and a physical acting out of that verse in Philippians, "At the Name of Jesus, every knee shall bow," [at 11:00: which we will sing in a few moments]. Names, after all, are important to us. We name a child very prominently in our Baptismal service. The Jews have a Name for God that is too holy to pronounce aloud. In J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth, as well as the world of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter, it is dangerous even to mention the name of the Dark Lord or evil one. It is in this spirit of the kingship implied in the Name of Jesus that I personally adhere to this old practice of bowing my head. Admittedly, this has the danger of becoming a game. But if done without ostentation, and not chastising yourself when you forget, it has become to me a reminder that I am subject to a greater power that we Episcopalians choose to call 'God.' *"Be still, then, and know that I am God."*

Finally, in the spirit of personal testimonial, I wish to apply this lesson to myself and my *own* name. I must admit that I have never been quite comfortable with the meaning of my name, "Timothy." In Greek 'Timotheus,' means "Fearing God." And shortened to 'Tim,' which is what I'm usually called, it just means "fear." It's where we get the English word "timid." I often prefer to think of it as "In Awe of God." Yet applying it to the theme of this reflection – the theme of comfort and a personal sense of peace due to abdicating one's worries and longing for security into the hands of a powerful king– perhaps I can modify the meaning in my own head, and reflect on this every time anyone says my name: *"Be still, Tim – timid one – and know that I am God."*