

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST *Christ the King* Nov. 24, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today marks the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost, but it is also called *Christ the King* Sunday. In the special vocabulary of the church, this day also marks the end of what we term *Ordinary Time*, that is, the period outside of other major seasons: both the time *between Pentecost and Advent* and *between Epiphany and Lent*. There are from 33 to 34 Sundays in Ordinary Time after Pentecost --- so a big part of the year, more than 60%. This final Sunday was not designated as *Christ the King* Sunday until 1925 when Pope Pius XI instituted it. The reason for doing so is interesting, so I want to give you a bit of that background because it helps us to understand not only the original purpose of the day but also its continuing relevance.

In the pope's encyclical, he noted the increase in secularism in his day and the decline in traditional Christian faith. In the 1920s, dictatorships of various kinds were emerging in Europe, the most notable being those we associate with Franco's Spain, Mussolini's Italy, and Adolf Hitler's Germany in that tumultuous period between the two world wars. Those movements were either *not* Christian or only *nominally* so, and the pope wanted to call attention to how this signaled a waning of the traditional Christian faith in the part of the world where it had enjoyed its greatest influence. After all, in the Middle Ages, there was only one church in Europe, the Roman Catholic Church, and it remained the only religious option until well into the 16th century.

Although Hitler, for example, gave lip service to wanting to preserve Germany's Christian character, he in fact did everything in his power to ignore or oppose the basic tenets of Christianity, robbed the institutional churches of their independence, and rendered their ordained clergy powerless. There remained nothing identifiably Christian about the official Catholic or Lutheran churches (the only ones recognized by the state) in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.

So, that is the context in which we can best understand why this feast of the church was created --- and why this occurred as recently as the first quarter of the 20th century. Because the term "Christ the King" can be off-putting for many people today.

They either can't comprehend why Americans would want to obey *any* king after waging a revolutionary war to unseat the British monarchs, or they find little in the term "king" that has much to do with Jesus of Nazareth, and --- finally --- we live in an age characterized by a very high degree of individualism which can't be reconciled very well with the notion of monarchy. It is clear that secularism and individualism are even more pronounced today than they were 100 years ago.

Nevertheless, scripture uses the terms *king* and *kingdom* quite frequently, and Jesus seems to have explained his mission in terms of wishing to build the “kingdom of God” on earth. So, how do we make sense of these seeming contradictions?

In part, it is a question of the meaning of the words themselves. The word for kingdom in Greek can refer to the *power* or *authority to rule* as king. Thus, “entering the kingdom of God” might better be understood as “accepting God’s rule (over me/us).” In Luke’s understanding, the kingdom of God is not something that can be seen. It is something within us. It is something preached or proclaimed”, so again a better sense of kingdom can be defined as “God’s power to rule over us” than a place where God rules. In one contemporary translation of the Bible, Luke 23:42 is rendered as “remember me when you come *into power*.”

Another way to approach the question is to ask, what kind of king did Jesus intend to be? It is possible to argue that given the kind of person he had revealed himself to be, “he gave himself no other choice but to head toward Jerusalem and face the consequences of the deep antagonism he had created by his faithfulness to God.”

This means that “he chose the kind of king he would be.” Thus, his life itself became the primary way of defining kingship as he understood it. So, that’s one place to start in understanding the kind of ruler Jesus seems to have been speaking of when he used the term. If a crowd’s principal experiences had been with King Herod or the Roman Emperor, it is likely that the first manifestations of monarchy that came to mind in the first century had to do with oppressive systems of government which used violent means to control captive populations and based their very notion of empire on the forced subjugation of many peoples without their consent, depriving the poor and the powerless of any kind of dignity.

Changing the vocabulary doesn’t do much to alter the reality. Whether you use the terms *kingdom* or *realm* in English matters hardly at all. So, if we’re going to understand how Jesus could have claimed to be trying to establish his own kingdom on earth, we need to view the words with an altogether new understanding. We know that Jesus was not really advocating mere regime change. He was announcing *a whole new way* of living and of being in relationship with God and one’s neighbors. If we use the words of Jesus in an honest way, we soon recognize that when he spoke of God’s kingdom, he was talking about *something wholly different* from the normal meaning of any “kingdom of this world.”

In this reading, Jesus is on the cross --- “not the place you’d look for a king, but then again, nothing is ever quite what you expect with Jesus.” For example, what kind of king is it “who welcomes a criminal into his realm and promises relief and release amid obvious agony? It is a king who refuses to conform to the expectations of this world, who will be governed neither by its limited vision of

worthiness nor its truncated understanding of justice....a king who is not content to rule from afar, but rather comes to meet us in our weakness and need. It is a king willing to embrace all, forgive all, redeem all, because that is his deepest and truest nature.”

So, it can make sense to turn things around and first pose the question “*what kind of king is this?*” and then let the question itself provide the answer indirectly. For example, what kind of king is crucified at a place called the Skull? With criminals on either side? What kind of king forgives rather than executes judgment, allows himself to be disrespected and abused without defending himself? allows even criminals to mock him without putting them in their place? whose thoughts are on others rather than his own pain? How can a crucified king bring us life? How can a peaceful king end the wars that rage within us and around us? How can a compassionate king find the strength to lead us?

His life as revealed in the gospel accounts answers these questions when we ask them in this way: *in the eyes of Jesus*, not those of the world, what was kingship? When we do that, the significance of *Christ the King* Sunday comes into clear focus.

Amen.

Sources:

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