

*Christ the King Sunday*

*November 20, 2016*

*ECOHS*

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. The annual cycle of the church year begins again next week with the first Sunday of Advent.

This holy day was added relatively recently in the way the church measures time. Unlike Easter, the epicenter of our faith, or other holidays added over many centuries, Christ the King Sunday was only added by the Roman Catholic Church in 1925 and brought into the Anglican tradition even more recently.

Christ the King Sunday was added during a tumultuous time in human history. Europe was still recovering from the devastation of the Great War, World War I, in which a generation of young men had lost their lives in trench warfare.

The wider society was growing more and more secular. People had lost their faith in God and their connection to the church. And there was the rise of authoritarian leaders, most notable in Italy in the 1920's, Benito Mussolini.

The Church decided to push back and proclaim what we believe—that ancient creed of the church, “Jesus is Lord” or as they expressed it, “Christ is King.”

In some ways, it must have felt like the church was whistling by the graveyard. Leaders must have worried, “Is the church and our faith in Christ still relevant?” Some things never change. So the church needed to dig deep into its soul and express what it means when we say “Jesus is Lord, Christ is King.”

According to the lectionary-- that is, the readings assigned through the three cycles of the church year-- there are three different Gospel passages used for Christ the King Sunday.

One is the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25; one is Jesus' conversation with Pilate in John 18; and the third is what we heard today—the crucifixion of Jesus as told by Luke.

Matthew's version is the closest to our traditional sense of kingship—the judgment of the nations based on how they treated the poor, the stranger, the sick, and prisoners.

But today's Gospel does not seem kingly at all. Jesus has been unjustly arrested, beaten, and now being executed in public. How does this tragedy tell us that Christ is the King? Why is it used on this day?

You see, Jesus of Nazareth has a remarkable story—a miraculous birth; a precocious youth, conversing with scholars in the Temple at the age of twelve; a public ministry known for miraculous healing and profound teaching; and just a few days before his arrest, he had

entered Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna” and the waving of palm branches by joyous people. Why not use one of these happier scenes instead?

Here is the answer: As Christians, we believe that God became human in Jesus Christ. In the totality of his humanity, even or even especially in his death, Jesus revealed God’s love for us—and revealed all that it means to be human, including the dark part of being human.

In this Gospel and the passages before and after it, we learn about this dark side of being human. One part is how we use power. People who have it, like to keep it, sometimes by any means necessary. Conversely, people without power seek ways to gain it, again sometimes by any means necessary.

Historically, one way people seek to keep or gain power is to scapegoat and stigmatize opponents in order to pull them down from power or keep them down and without power.

This is part of what happened to Jesus. The religious leaders of his people and the foreign empire that oppressed Jesus’ country decided he was a threat to them and decided to make an example of him.

As Jesus hung on the cross, people verbally abused him. The people in power scoffed at him—you would expect them to do that. The soldiers who did the dirty work of killing him mocked him, too, maybe to justify what they were doing. Even one of the criminals being crucified alongside him insulted him.

There is something in humans that likes to gloat as we take someone down. It is not an easy part to look at. But if we talk to people who are targets of this abuse or if we read the news or study history, we know that demonizing and harming groups of people is part of the human story. So Jesus’ death revealed that.

Here is the good news (and we need some good news!)--it is not the *only* part of our story, the only part of being human. That is what Jesus revealed to us, too.

That good news is revealed through the whole story of his life and the hope of his resurrection. Jesus revealed how human beings can be courageous and fun and compassionate in a way that makes us glad to be one. His resurrection gives us hope that there is an ultimate reality beyond this world’s power.

I suggest that we all read a Gospel from front to back in one sitting to help us see that good news of Jesus (that is what “Gospel” means after all). Matthew is the Gospel we will start using next week. Mark is the shortest. You choose.

In addition to that homework, let’s look for the good news in the dark passage we just read. There are three things I want to point out to give us hope in Christ the crucified King:

First, when Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” I find hope in that.

Even this awful act was not big enough to keep people from God’s love expressed in Jesus and his forgiveness of us.

Forgiveness was not only for the people in that moment—but for all of us who would do harm to others when we do not understand what we are doing.

Second, the story of that criminal crucified with Jesus, the one who repented, known in tradition as Dimas. His story gives me hope.

He rebuked the other crucified criminal who was insulting Jesus. Dimas confessed that the two of them were guilty of their crimes. But he knew that Jesus was innocent.

He asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus would come into the kingdom. This man appeared to have no hope—he was hanging in agony on a cross-- but he trusted in a man that gave him insight into God’s goodness and humanity’s potential to be good and do good. Jesus promised him “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Third, though it is not in the Scripture, I wonder what these two men did after this famous exchange. I can imagine that they prayed for each other, sang hymns together, encouraged one another as the pain got worse and their death neared.

That scene is not described for us, but we can imagine the goodness of God being poured into a truly horrible situation. God was still with the two of them even on the cross, and that gives me hope.

So what does all this mean for us? The obvious part-- whether in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy, or in our world today—is that we need to remember that our allegiance is to Christ the King.

We want to be good citizens, no matter which country we live in. We are to obey laws and work hard and pray for our secular leaders. Amen. But as Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, “...our citizenship is in heaven” (*Philippians. 3:20*).

And if we are to follow Christ the King, we will need to begin with forgiveness. That is what Jesus offered even from the cross.

We need forgiveness for ourselves first-- and we need to share it with others. That is the central point of the Lord’s Prayer. If we just focus on forgiveness, we will have much work to do.

I know I need forgiveness for when I have a bad attitude or unkind thoughts; when I say harsh words or do harmful actions. And I need to be quicker to forgive others when they say

and do unkind things, too. Hard stuff, but ultimately so good for us and for our salvation. And for our common life today.

But that's not all. If Christ is King for us, we will need to speak up like that criminal on the cross did. We may need to set someone straight who is verbally abusing a wounded, vulnerable person or group of people.

We also need to remember that those doing harm, like that other criminal on the cross, may be wounded, too. Their words and their actions may come from their pain.

And we will need to stand alongside vulnerable people to protect them if we can and to pray for them, encourage them, and be in solidarity with them no matter what. That is what we do if we follow Jesus as our Lord.

So today, Christ the King Sunday, is a good way to end the church year and help us to process this I-o-n-g election season and what is next for us as a country.

Next Sunday Advent begins—a season of repentance and hope. May it bring a blessed, holy time for all people of the world and for this country. Amen.