

Sermon - Christ the King, Year A
11/26/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On my visit to New York last week, I was happy to connect with a friend of mine who is celebrating forty years of priesthood this year. He is also a musician – a guitarist and a drummer – and he told me a story about his very first years in ministry. His first call was at a parish in rural upstate New York, and he became known around his small town as something of a traveling musician. If you needed someone to play at your wedding or bar mitzvah or retirement party, my friend was your guy. One autumn, not long after his arrival in town, he was asked to play at the graveside burial of a parishioner from another church. He recalled to me his delight to have been asked. *Yes!* He thought to himself, *I'm going to show them what I can do!*

On the day of the burial, he made sure he had his guitar and his very best cassock, and he began the half-hour or so drive to the next town over. Everything was great, everything was going to be perfect. But after quite a bit of driving, he realized that he wasn't precisely sure where the gravesite actually was. He drove and he drove – he arrived in the right town, and he figured the graveyard couldn't be far away. He was nervous there, for awhile, but *ah – yes, there* – he suddenly spied two men digging in the distance, and he knew he'd found the correct spot. A half an hour late. There was no one in the field but the gravediggers. The family must have come and gone.

Heartbroken, my friend concluded that the only appropriate thing to do was to play for the deceased himself. And play he did. Right alongside that hole in the earth, my friend poured his heart into hymn after hymn. He's singing. He's crying. He's offering his soul to God for the eternal repose of this beloved servant. He plays for a while. He wipes the tears from his face. He nods to the gravediggers, who have been listening and crying along with him. And as he turns to

go, he hears one digger say to the other: “Wow. I’ve been digging septic tanks in this town for twenty years, and I’ve *never* seen anything like that.”

Today in the Church year, we celebrate the great Feast of Christ the King. This is the final Sunday before we begin the new liturgical year with the season of Advent next week. It’s a bit like new years eve today, as we gather and recognize the sovereign power of Jesus Christ above and before and beyond any other sort of power that this created world has ever known.

This Feast is a relatively recent one, all things considered. It was instituted after the first World War by Pope Pius XI who looked at the settling of scores in the early 1920s and declared that while there was a truce, there was no true peace. No leader or army or nation would ever have the power to redeem the destruction of the Great War. Only the mercy and peace and sovereignty of Jesus could ever heal what the world had suffered. Christians throughout the world, Roman Catholic and otherwise, embraced this idea, turning to the many, many passages from scripture that name Jesus “King of Kings” and describe the outworking of his glorious reign.

This language of kingship sometimes sits uncomfortably with us today, especially for those of us who are Americans. I mean, didn’t we fight and win a rather definitive war to never have to think very seriously about any king ever again? We are not generally a people with affectionate feelings for monarchy. Perhaps you find yourself uncomfortable with the inherent patriarchy behind the word, too. Or the idea of an absolute power. Or perhaps the whole thing just seems a little antiquated and unnecessary, even untouchable. How much easier to think of Jesus as the baby in the manger or as a healer than as a character from a Medieval fantasy.

I’d like to suggest today that our modern thinking about “kingship” is very like an earnest afternoon of singing hymns into a hole for a septic tank. We think we know what’s going on. We

think we've found the place where we are supposed to be. The signs that we see all suggest to us that our understanding is correct. And yet...our desire for something to be true does not necessarily make it so. If we dismiss the kingship of Jesus, we haven't quite arrived in the place where he has invited us to play.

When we in the Church declare that Christ is king, we are celebrating two freshly liberating truths. First, the truth that if Christ is king, no one else is. No earthly power is more important or more real. We do not put our trust or our faith in any ruler, any political party or system, any wealth or power, any strongman or woman, any allegedly "superior" way of life, and least of all, in ourselves. We belong to God. And in God, we are beloved and we are free.

The second truth is that true kingship looks different than the kingships of human history. We only need turn to the Bible. What does true kingship look like? *I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.* True kingship is the Good Shepherd. True kingship is the One who is not found among the powerful or the wealthy or the brave, but among the hungry, the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. These are the righteous, says the Lord.

In the Gospel from St. Matthew today, the ones at the right hand of the Son of Man ask, "when did we feed you? When did we clothe you? When did we care for you or visit you in prison?" The king says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." You were looking in the right place.

Those on his left ask, "when did we miss you? When did we not care for you?" And the king replies, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do

it to me.” You were singing into the septic tank. You thought you knew where I was, but in truth, I was not there.

This Feast of Christ the King is an invitation to recognize true kingship, true power, and recognize where it is truly found. It is God’s insistence that we should never prefer any earthly mechanisms of power over the open hands of a person in need. Today we rejoice that our king is a shepherd. He seeks us out. He calls us his children. He fills our outstretched hands, and he welcomes us home.

Amen.