

**Last Pentecost
Christ the King
November 24, 2013**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The god alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This is our last Sunday of Pentecost Season, the Sunday before our national holiday of Thanksgiving, and a week before Advent begins in our countdown to Christmas. Turkeys are selling fast, shopping centers are already decorating for Christmas, the Lights of St. Augustine were lit last night, families are already buying trees, and the big box stores are all set for Black Friday. So why on this Sunday do we hear the story of the crucifixion of Jesus? The only other time we hear this story is during the reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday. Why now?

For Episcopalians, Roman Catholics and other churches that follow the *Revised Common Lectionary*, this last Sunday of the Pentecost season ... which is also the last Sunday of our liturgical year ... honors "Christ the King." This is a relatively new entry to the Christian calendar. It has only been since 1925 ... less than 100 years ago ... that Pope Pius XI introduced the feast with an encyclical. His papal letter summarized the Bible's teachings about the kingship of Christ and set this as the day to remember it.

For me, at least, the language of kingship is outmoded and no longer appropriate. We don't live under kings, so the metaphor feels irrelevant. And we're rightly repulsed at how the reigns of many kings throughout history often meant a reign of terror for their subjects ... massive wealth and power attained by extortion and exploitation ... and which was then passed on by birthright to people who did nothing to deserve it.

Nonetheless, the language of kingship is embedded in the Christian story. This dates to the early days of the Israelites occupy the land of Canaan. The twelve tribes of Israel set kings to govern their defenses against the invasion of foreign kings. The earliest followers of Jesus, and especially his detractors, used the language of kingship to describe who he was, what he said, and what he did. Unless we want to follow Thomas Jefferson, and snip and clip the parts of the Bible that we don't like ... creating a Bible in your own image ... we're left with the language of kingship.

There was a mix up in the insert to the bulletin last week so we didn't get to hear the portion from Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica that was supposed to have been our second reading. Anyhow, it is a story of the struggle between two kings ... Jesus and Caesar. Paul's ministry in Thessalonica started in the local synagogue, then expanded to include "a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women." But then came the detractors. A mob complained to city officials that the believers "defied Caesar's decrees" by

saying that "there is another king, one called Jesus." The result was that Thessalonica erupted in riots.

Throughout Paul's ministry civic-minded Romans accused the early Christian believers of rabble-rousing and subversion because of the political implications of their confession of "another king," a "kingdom of God," and a "citizenship in heaven." If Jesus is Lord and King, then allegiance to him is absolute and unconditional. Political heresy then follows from that assertion ... Caesar, Herod, and Pilate were no longer the royalty of the realm. At best, the people's allegiance to them was relative and conditional, and at worst, they were to be considered bogus and were to be toppled.

The story of the crucifixion we hear this morning comes from the 23rd chapter of Luke and we hear the soldiers mocking Jesus about the inscription that he was "King of the Jews." Several verses earlier in that same chapter we hear how that inscription came to be. After his arrest Jesus was dragged to the Roman governor's palace for three reasons, and they were all political: "We found this fellow subverting the nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King." Jesus died as a politically subversive criminal; his followers were subversive citizens.

Pilate met the angry mob outside the praetorium, then grilled Jesus alone when they were back inside. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asked Jesus.

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus replied. "My kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" mocked Pilate.

To which Jesus answered, "Yes, you are right in saying that I am a king."

Pilate went back outside, declared that Jesus was innocent, and then had his soldiers beat, flog, and humiliate Jesus with purple robes and a crown of thorns. "Hail, O king of the Jews!" the crowd mocked. The mob hounded Pilate: "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." Pilate therefore found himself caught between angering the mob on the one hand, and betraying his emperor on the other.

Pilate caved in to the desire of the crowd: "Here is your king. Shall I crucify your king?"

The crowd answered, "We have no king but Caesar!"

Pilate insulted the Jews one last time by fastening a notice to the cross, written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, which he knew would offend them: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The crowd objected, of course: "Don't write 'The king of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." It was too late: "What I have written, I have written," said Pilate.

If the language of kingship in the gospel seems archaic and no longer relevant, Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae in today's second lesson describes the experience in other words. It seems like the church at Colossae was disjointed and faced a mishmash of spiritual teachings. Paul mentions philosophic speculations, ascetic practices about food and drink, and religious rituals based upon the lunar calendar. All these, Paul says, are a mere "shadow" compared to

the "reality" that is experienced in Christ. Jesus wasn't just the son of a carpenter, says Paul. He wasn't just an itinerate rabbi, or a rogue "king" who angered Rome. He's not even merely "the head of the church." Yes, he's all these, but he's far more.

The words of the Letter to the Colossian makes the language of kingship look pale and puny by comparison. For Paul, Jesus is the Lord of all creation and cosmos, whether "things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities."

The observance of Christ the King in our liturgical calendar may be relatively new ... less than one hundred years old. And, for me at least, it seems to elevate the Jesus that taught about the kingdom of God being here and now ... here in this place ... and now, not sometime in the future ... it elevates Jesus to a position above the realities of this world as if he was a monarch on a throne wanting our worship.

Yet, each Sunday I begin my sermons with the invocation "The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus." For me, that God that is alive in Jesus is the Christ ... the Christ essence ... and that same Christ essence is available to each of us. That Christ is King tells me that when I allow that Christ essence that is alive in me rule my life than I come the closest I can come to living in the image of God. When that Christ essence in me overcomes my fear of the other ... that is when I am allowing the Christ essence to govern my life. When the common good weighs heavier than my selfish desire is when the Christ essence in me directs my being.

Jesus taught about the kingdom of God ... the way the world would be ... your world and my world ... if God were alive in everyone's heart the way God was alive in the heart of Jesus. Jesus did not ask to be worshipped. Rather Jesus pointed to God. Instead of worshipping the Christ on a throne above all, I think Christ the King is about living as if God were alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus.

Christ the King Sunday. The turkeys are selling, the decorations are up, the lights have been lit, and we are moving into a culture of consumerism that wants to make the almighty dollar the king. The God alive in each of you as God was alive in Jesus wants a different allegiance ... one that leads to the fullness of life, not just immediate gratification. That Christ essence is alive in all of you. Listen to it and let it have the power to rule in your life.

Amen.