November 24, 2013 – Feast of Christ the King (Proper 29)

© Jean E. Mornard

Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, which is the last day of the Church’s liturgical year. It is also designated as the Feast of Christ the King. Though this sounds like an old, traditional feast day, it’s actually relatively new. Really new, in fact.

This is from Wikipedia: In 1925, Pope Pius XI established the last Sunday in October as the Feast of Christ the King. He did so in order to remind people of Christ's everlasting authority over the people of the earth, thereby signaling the church's resistance to the rising tide of secular values and ideas in politics as well as in social matters.

This Roman Catholic feast day was then adopted by the Episcopal Church as well as other churches of the Anglican Communion. In 1970 the Roman Catholic Church moved the feast to the last Sunday before the new church year begins in Advent, as did the Episcopal Church, in order to emphasize its eschatological importance.

Eschatological, by the way, is one of those fancy two dollar words that we learn in seminary and like to trot out in order to sound smart. All it means is “regarding the end times.” So the Church felt that there wasn’t enough emphasis on the coming reign of Christ, and they relocated the feast day for the very end of the Church calendar to drive the point home. End of the year, end times. Very subtle.

So why are we reading about the crucifixion on this feast day. Wouldn’t that be better suited for Lent, or some other solemn occasion? And what on earth kind of king is a king on a cross?

That’s the answer right there. Jesus is not an earthly king at all, and his coronation is not a glorious spectacle of pomp and circumstance, but rather an ignominious execution observed by a few jeering Romans, some sneering Jewish leaders, and a handful of shocked followers, mostly women. By earthly standards, not much of a king at all.

But by heavenly standards, here is the true king of glory and king of peace. Here is a king who has sacrificed everything for his kingdom.

As it says in our reading from Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

And yet, with all of the power of the universe at his fingertips, he gave it all up for a time to live among us. To live and die as one of us. To be an example for us to follow of servant leadership.

This is why the Cross is so important in this kingdom. In paying the ultimate price of dying on the Cross, and then being resurrected, Jesus and his kingdom rise above mere earthly realms and are established as the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God.

We in this country struggle with the idea of a king. We can’t help it - it’s built into our national heritage. We fought a terrible war to keep from being under the thumb of a monarch ever again and we spend an inordinate amount of time amending and defending the documents that were written over two hundred years ago for the purpose of preventing any kind of kingdom from being established on our shores. So it makes sense, in some ways, to ask why on earth would we want to put ourselves under the rule of Christ the King.

And a lot of people in the Church really push back against the concept of a kingly Jesus, which I don’t quite understand. Maybe they hate the notion of being under anyone’s dominion, or maybe it has bled over from our independent nature as a country, or maybe they’re just afraid that they’re not completely in charge of their lives. Whatever the reason, they bend over backwards to take all of the ruling language out of their worship lives, which must make this feast day pretty tricky for them.

Though I can sort of see some of their reasoning, I also find that attitude kind of sad because I think they’re missing the point both of the kind of king Jesus is and the nature of the kingdom itself.

First of all, Christ the King is not Christ the Despot or Christ the Tyrant or Christ the Dictator. If the Gospels haven’t made at least THAT point clear, people just aren’t reading them. In Luke alone, the kingdom of God is mentioned nearly three dozen times. Most of those occurrences are in the context, not of ruling or being ruled over, but in the context of the kingdom as a gift – a gift specifically given to the poor and the helpless.

* Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)
* Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.’ (Luke 10:9)
* Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)
* People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. (Luke 13:29)
* The kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:21)
* It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Luke 18:25)
* And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me. (Luke 22:29)
* And finally, in today’s reading, the repentant thief said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42)

So this kingdom of God is not a kingdom where people are forced to live under the thumb of a ruler, but rather a place where the subjects are co-equals with the king himself. This is the new kind of king that Jesus is. Jesus chose to come to live among us. He didn’t have to. And in choosing to live among us, he also chose to die as one of us, frail and broken. But in his humanity, he didn’t give up his kingship. Rather, he conferred it upon us.

On November 22nd, fifty years ago, at 1:00 central time, Americans reeled in shock as they heard the news that President Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas. This past Friday, Facebook and Twitter were full of “where were you when Kennedy was shot” stories. I personally was in third grade, and I remember them wheeling a television set into the library so we could watch the news. Then they sent us home early. I didn’t really understand what was going on, but I remember where I was, like it was yesterday.

Every generation seems to have one or more “where were you when…” events. Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked? Where were you when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon? Where were you when the Twin Towers fell? These are cataclysmic events that leave an indelible mark on our souls, good or bad. They are events of great power.

Today’s Gospel tells us of the greatest cataclysmic event of all time – one that ultimately changed the whole world – disguised as the lowly death of an itinerant Galilean preacher and healer. And today we are celebrating what on the surface may have seemed like a disaster, and the end of everything, but was in fact the start of the greatest kingdom known to man.

Christ’s kingdom is not made up of countries, or land, or armies, or palaces. Christ’s kingdom is made up of the hearts of men and women – of all of us. We are God’s kingdom. So if that’s the case, what can we possibly do but to follow the example of our king in our own lives? What can we possibly do but treat others, especially the poor, the sick, the disabled, the downtrodden, with compassion and fairness? In the words of the prophet Micah, what can we possibly do but what the Lord requires of us - to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?

Well, in fact, there are a lot of things we can possibly do. But I know in my heart what we SHOULD do. Follow our crucified and resurrected Lord.

And now, in that peculiar way of our liturgical calendar, we will carry God’s kingdom forward with us into the new year, as once again, we await the Advent of our King – the true king of glory and king of peace.

Amen.