



# SAINT LUKE'S

CHRIST THE KING  
YEAR A

EZEKIEL 34:11-16, 20 -24

PSALM 95:1-7A

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

MATTHEW 25:31-46

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

NOVEMBER 26, 2017

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, more commonly referred to as The Feast of Christ the King, is a relatively recent addition to our liturgical calendar. Pope Pius XI instituted it in 1925, originally on the Sunday preceding The Feast of All Saints, which we commemorated a few weeks back. In the long timeline of our liturgical observance, The Feast of Christ the King is a veritable spring chicken, having not yet seen its one hundredth celebration. It is one which, if I'm honest, I have a dual experience of, simultaneously relishing the splendor of the imagery and comforted by the magisterial weight of it all, while also feeling a bit of a tension as I reach the edge of our poetic language and truly consider what I mean by the proclamation that Christ is king of the Universe.

To claim that Christ is king feels a bit different than the historic Christian declaration that Christ is Lord. Perhaps it is the historical memory of what I perceive a king to be. Modern western monarchies feel like cherished antiques, prized more for their sentimental charm than for their practical political function, a sort of non-partisan national unifier in many cases. But this is not the weight that the word king carries in my memory. Divine Right, monolithic authority, elevated above (perhaps slightly aloof?), the final arbiter of order and peace; these are things which come to mind when I consider kingship. And when I begin to peer deeper into my assumptions of what it means for Christ to be king, I sense a disconnect between my poetic imagination and my lived experience.

Is this our experience of Christ; is this how we understand him as king and lord? In your life as a Christian, do your prayers bring swift justice or resolution? Does right always win out at the end of the day? Is your life upheld with a firm sense of order and stability, unshakable on its foundations? These are rhetorical questions; if any of you are eagerly nodding yes, please, speak with me after mass...I clearly have much to learn. I ask these questions not to challenge the image of Christ asking of both our hearts and all the created order. Instead, I want to avoid emulating our friend Pope Pius who instituted this feast.

Elected to the papacy nearly 4 years after World War I, Pius XI was surrounded by the crumbling of the old houses of Europe, the rise of industrialization and its attendant social rifts, increased secularization, and the progression towards statehood on the part of many European political actors. Pius saw the beginnings of the collapse of papal political power (say that five times fast), particularly in relation towards the recently unified kingdom of Italy, in which a tug of war had ensued for the control of former papal estates and property.

What I am trying to say with this summary is that Pius was surrounded by the physical and social erosion of the power of Christendom, he saw that the church was no longer the authoritative word in the affairs of the world around him, and so it was into this confusion that he wrote first in 1922 "...as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Savior, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations."<sup>1</sup> Three years later

<sup>1</sup>Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio

he would write the letter which instituted today's feast, saying "'...[T]he Word of God... has necessarily supreme and absolute dominion over all things created." In Matthew 28:18 Jesus himself says, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me." In Revelations 19:16 Christ is recognized as "King of kings and Lord of lords."<sup>2</sup>

Pius' assertion of the Christ's authority and total dominance in this instance feels less like a return to the historical claim that Christ is Lord, though, and in some ways, more like a desperate reach to bring order and stability to a changing and confusing world. Speaking for myself, the situation in which Pius found himself in has striking similarities to my experience as a Christian in 2017. Today we consider Christ, enthroned in glory, with the authoritative promise of his coming kingdom, free from war and division. And yet we, as the body of Christ, find ourselves so often in a state of anxiety and frailty regarding the decline in church attendance, both in our denomination and across the nation. Often, our scriptures can feel archaic, the stories of miracles and divine intervention seemingly absurd in the face of ironclad scientific assertions, and our promises of hope and restoration seem dim in the light of unending conflict, unstoppable loss, and senseless violence.

What I want to examine within myself today, though, is how I might be willing easy claims about who I believe God to be or how God works within the world in order to bring myself comfort in times of uncertainty. It can be comforting to vigorously assert the dominance and strength of our faith over and against the shifting circumstances

<sup>2</sup> Quas Primas

around us, to declare the justice of God in a world with so much evil, the order of God in a world with so much chaos, but... are we proclaiming our faith in its fullness or grasping at projections of God in order to grant ourselves some measure of stability? Is this not how we come to experience disillusionment in our lives, when our image of God becomes, itself, an idol, only to be dashed to pieces when the complexities of our life are brought to bear?

This was the disillusionment of the disciples all throughout the gospels. They imagined Jesus to be a political ruler or warrior, to be the one to drive out the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel. Over and over again their faith in this image of Jesus was confounded by who Jesus truly was. Here was a messiah who challenged the religious establishment and priestly class, who ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, who spoke to Gentile women, who was given over to the Roman authorities to be executed as a common criminal. How often in our lives do we echo Peter in response to how God operates in the world around us, confounding our vision of how we believe God should behave: “God forbid it Lord!”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus in Matthew 25 establishes his authority and his majesty through yet another paradox: When the king comes in his glory, with all the angels with him, the righteous will ask “Lord when did we see you...?” and they will be answered “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.” Christ in his majesty immediately identifies with the “least of these”, and in this way, the

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16

royal authority of Christ parallels how he came to us as a first century carpenter from Nazareth. Jesus in his first coming subverted and confounded the expectations of rational minds. “So you are a king?” asked Pilate in John’s Passion, and Jesus responds “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”<sup>4</sup> Here, as we prepare for the season of Advent, hoping and striving towards the dawn of God’s Day, Christ in Matthew’s gospel delineates clear characteristics of the kingdom of Heaven, and they are not based in our power, or our wealth, or the subjugation and conversion of others to our way of belief, the height of our steeples, or the strength of our institutions. Instead, Christ, our king, turns our expectation of his reign on its head, providing us with a very specific lens with which to view The Kingdom of Heaven: His Incarnation. We establish our citizenry in the Kingdom of God, therefore, when we model the behavior of our king. Our king is not austere and aloof, but intimately connected to the beauties and the pains of human existence. Our king’s power comes not through political might, but through service and self-offering. The wealth of his kingdom is not gathered through greed and self interest but through giving with no expectation of reward. The glory of our king shines forth not with banners and trumpets, but from the depths of the human heart: There, in the homeless woman perched outside of your usual subway stop; over there in the coworker you find grating, and here, within this blessedly complicated community we call St Luke’s. And, just like the righteous in our gospel for today, you will not know him immediately when you see it, but he will know you. May

<sup>4</sup>John 18

our Lord, therefore, give us the clarity of vision to watch for His presence *as it is* among us instead of how we imagine it might be, and may we be found ready at his coming.

Amen.

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