

## Following a Heavenly King

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

Today is the feast day of Christ the King. It occurs to me that many people do not know the origin of this feast day or its significance. It also occurs to me, that after a season of “No Kings” protests throughout our country, the topic of kings might be a triggering one. But today marks the 100-year anniversary of this special feast, and the reason for its inception may be just as significant today as it was when Pope Pius XI instituted it.

Christ the King became a feast day in 1925, not that long ago, as a response against secularism and atheism. Also, it was to counter the growth of Mussolini’s fascism, Stalinism and Nazism. This feast day is intended to remind Christians of Christ’s royal supremacy over ALL earthly powers and all of creation. At a time when Americans on BOTH sides of a heightened, polarized, political climate have claimed the other side to be fascist, Nazi, or mindless cult-followers, it might be helpful to clarify the problematic components of these political ideologies, why Christians claim allegiance to a heavenly king, and how our life on this earth can be lived synchronously with the claims of our faith. This morning is not about debating American politics; it is an invitation for all of us to reimagine Jesus’ reign and **OUR** participation in his kingdom.

We will not be having a lecture on political ideology this morning, don’t worry! But these totalitarian governments provide a wonderful foil for our life under Christ’s rulership. So, we will peek at them a little. While Mussolini and Hitler’s fascism opposed Stalin’s communism, all three of these systems share a common theme. All three systems were totalitarian, demanding absolute loyalty and exerting complete control. These systems were built on cults of personality, demanding pure allegiance to satisfy imperialist ambitions. They reigned by terror and violence, disregarding the rule of law, and disregarding the dignity of human individuality. As much as we’d all like to deny it, our

human nature inherently desires to control others. The elevation of “Christ the King” by Christians is an act of resistance against our natural propensities, the pull of the worlds’ systems, and consequently is an essential part of our liturgical practice.

Whereas authoritarians, uses violence, abusing human rights, and forcefully suppressing individual liberty through heightened militarism, God’s rulership is the opposite. Jesus lived to follow God’s leadership and his life illustrated God’s priorities. Jesus demonstrated poverty, service, humility, the elevation of human differences, and a love of outsiders. Jesus showed us how to live in a way that honors the King of Creation. Now, to honor Jesus, we make our life about following the example of Christ our King.

Americans have strong feelings about kings. Our country was built on the ideals of human equality and democratic rule. We do not want anyone telling us what we must do from an elevated position of power, especially when that person has the ability to exploit and silence us. You know what? God feels the same way. A lot of the Hebrew Bible is about Israel’s monarchy, the battle to maintain it, and its eventual destruction. We get very excited about King David and Jesus coming in that royal line. But God never wanted Israel to have a king. God was the first one to warn us that human rulers will always ultimately become corrupt, abuse the weak, and steal from those they are meant to protect. God wanted to save us from that! God’s rulership is entirely unlike anything humans can reconstruct or maintain. If you want to discuss the power of prayer, God gave the Israelites a monarchy in response to their prolonged and desperate prayers for something God opposed. Be careful what you wish for!

Now and ever since then, God’s people have conflated God’s leadership style with the image we have of human kings. As much as American’s oppose monarchies, we struggle to separate our imagination of worshiping Christ the King from a crown, wealthy splendor, and a throne. It is the imagery and language we have for royalty, and so we overlay it

across the risen Christ. The true image of divine kingship is inconceivable to us because it is so obscured in our imagination.

God's actual leadership style is displayed in today's readings, if we have eyes to see them. Jeremiah portrays God as a shepherd, a protector, a lover, and patient caregiver. In fact, when he references the coming of Christ the King, he talks with excited anticipation about the salvation of both Israel and Judah. Friends, these nations started as one unified Hebrew people. Their monarchy divided over conflicting political views and their ideology around proper worship. Rather than smite them both and executing justice for their collective evil and divisiveness, or even choosing one over the other, God promises that Jesus' kingship will unite them back together in safety. The rulership of God unites, rather than divides, it protects, rather than harms, and it brings peace through the removal of fear. God is not authoritarian. And in our Psalm, God's rulership offers hope and comfort to the suffering. Divine power makes wars cease as all humankind finds a safe refuge together in the holy city of God. God's authority is not cruel or vicious; it is tender in its strength.

Then Luke shows us our true king, the man, Jesus. Our human imagination looks for gilded palaces and elevated thrones. But Jesus's elevation was on a cross where he hung naked and humiliated, between convicted felons, and forgave those who were actively murdering him while bartering for his clothes. The King of Kings, Lord of Lord, monarch over all monarchs, is a suffering, crucified, Jewish man. We worship a God who shows power through powerlessness. We are here celebrating Christ the King, and he did conquer death. He did overcome the power of the grave. But the way he lived on earth was through weakness. If we want to follow Jesus the way Jesus followed God, we must allow our brains to be rewired around what divine authority looks like.

Paul's letter to the church in Colossae helps us understand why Jesus lived as such an unexpected king. "Jesus is the image of the invisible God", showing us what God looks like.

Jesus is supreme over everything we experience and every authority over us. And because God loves the creation so much, Jesus was sent by God on a rescue mission to reconcile all our broken pieces back into perfect unity with God, others, and all creation. Jesus' life and DEATH did that for us. Now, when we follow under the leadership of our king Jesus, we participate in that same work, as peacemakers and reconcilers. Our participation in the KINGdom of God is to patiently endure suffering, joyfully giving thanks, and exercising the strength of our royal identity through lives of service to the weak and humble love towards our enemies.

The feast of Christ the King is important, because we worship a different type of king in a different type of way. We do not bow in humility before Christ to stay immobilized by feelings of inadequacy or helplessness. We are saints with a royal identity, empowered by the Spirit of God's own self. Jesus is our brother, bowing with us before God. It is through Christ we rise in the strength and the dignity of our Father God, empowered to go into the world and perform God's work of peacemaking and reconciliation.

Following Christ as our King means rejecting the lie of life apart from God. It means rejecting the lure of power found in human systems of governance and rule. It means rejecting the desire to dominate and control. And because God does not control us, following Christ as King is a choice we choose to live into. It is a decision we must make every hour of every day. It requires us to honestly assess our willingness to become suffering servants. It asks us to question if we are willing to accept Christ's strength to bless those who deliberately cause our harm.

The good news is Christ really is king and one day the power of love will fully and finally win the last battle. God will reign, Christ will be worshiped, and all of heaven and earth will experience the blessings of God's kingdom. Our choices today reverberate on the other side of veil and one day we will see what today we can only imagine. Every sacrifice we make for the kingdom will be rewarded under the gracious rule of our one true, and eternal

King.---- May we be a people willing to not just bow before Christ, but also stand and walk with him, accepting his strength to endure suffering, bringing his kingdom through our humility, as we walk into our inheritance with all the saints in light.