



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Anti-king
Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Sunday, November 22, 2020
The Rev. Amber Carswell

Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, the final Sunday of our church year, we mimic the trees outside in shedding our green coverings. Since about 1925, this day has also been called Christ the King Sunday. In terms of public holiday awareness, I think this day probably ranks right up there with Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day or National Scrapple Day, these holidays that really do exist but only for a few people with some very niche interests.

But in 1925, Pope Pius XI looked around and noticed that the world was growing ever more secular. Folks had stopped paying so much attention to popes, particularly what popes had to say about which lands belonged to the Holy Roman Empire, and who gets to govern those lands. So Pope Pius XI makes a declaration, the final Sunday of the liturgical year will be called Christ the King Sunday. The official title is "The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe." I am not making this up.

King of the Universe, because no one listens to popes anymore.¹ It's sort of breathtaking in its irony. It reminds me of driving through these abandoned backroads in Kansas, making my way home, and spotting a billboard in a field urging me to follow Jesus. Like, I'm covered — and there's no one else here. Who are you talking to?

But the irony of Christ the King compounds when you start to enter into Scripture. There's actually story from the gospels where people are searching for Jesus because they want to make him king, and he sees them coming and knows what they're about to do, and you know what he does? *He runs away.* Christ the King Sunday, and it is the height of injustice that that passage never comes up in the lectionary cycle.

What does come up in the lectionary on other years is the conversation where Pilate has the prisoner Jesus brought before him. Pilate looks this unremarkable, beaten, shackled, dirty Jewish guy up and down and says, "So you're some kind of king?" Pilate is laughing, and Pilate is us. We know what kings are, and it's not this.

Stories about kings are all over Scripture, all the way back to the beginnings of the Jewish people where the semi-autonomous tribes got together and said they wanted a king. The people clamor to the prophet Samuel, we want a king, give us a king, we need a king. God actually sounds a little hurt in response. Why do you need a king? You've got me. You don't want a king. He takes the best parts of what you have, he'll take your earnings, he'll take your children, you do not want a king. But the people clamor on, we want a king, give us a king, we need a king. Saul is chosen and the report on Saul is that

¹ The story is, of course, much more complicated and troubling than this simplification. Read David Kertzer's Pulitzer-prize winning *The Pope and Mussolini*, which tells of the history of the church supporting fascism in that pivotal era.

he is tall and handsome. We get no discussion of his disposition, policy, manners, pedigree, education, history. But he's what we want in a king, he's tall and handsome.

And man, if this story doesn't keep repeating itself ad nauseum. I don't know what it is about us that needs a king. Someone tall, standing a head above the ordinary masses, and if he can't be handsome, his magnetism will more than make up for it. We spend so much of our time on kings. There's something about the number of followers one can attract that makes us ready to pledge allegiance to them, ready to pledge allegiance to a way of telling us who is in and who is out.

Of course, I don't mean actual kings, given that I live in a republic where our kings get cycled through more quickly with more variety. I don't mean actual kings until I do mean actual kings, even British monarchy completely gutted of its official authority and power, enthralls us. We love kings. I don't know where I heard once that the marker of a good government is when you don't notice it in your life, but I don't think we really believe that. We love kings, we obsess over them, we feed them with ourselves. They drive children from their parents, they take the best parts of us.

Christ the King Sunday, a small and strange billboard posted in a land where all we know are kings. Even our gospel today seems ready to tell us who is in and who is out, the sheep and the goats, a delineation of our allegiance.

This is one of the more famous passages of Scripture, Matthew 25, where we hear that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, welcoming a stranger, are the unlikely markers of those who belong in God's kingdom. Nothing about accepting Jesus Christ as your lord and savior, just humble actions. Episcopalians tend to like this one, though we're not as likely to quote the latter half of this passage, where we hear that those who do not feed the hungry or clothe the naked or visit the prisoner or welcome the stranger are those who are headed for the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

I read this with relief and conviction. I have done those things that put me in the in-crowd. And then I have also not done those things, and feel the impossibility of having enough for everyone who asks something of me. I am in and out, a strange chimera of sheep and goat; maybe some days I'm all one or the other. Maybe you are, too.

And maybe that's the right dichotomy to hold on Christ the King Sunday.

That this allegiance doesn't turn you into a righteous Christian soldier in the king's ranks, but actually blurs the line between enemy and friend, the line between in and out, that line that runs right through the middle of yourself, too.

This would make a kingdom that subverts all our ideas about kingdoms, it is one that could end our fascination with rivalry and celebrity and scandal.

This is the king that dismantles kingship. This is the king of no kings at all, and you crown him only by humility. You crown him by your tears.