

SERMON- Christ the King (A)

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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalms 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

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Matthew 25:31-46

OPENING:

On the Sunday after the most American of holidays, Thanksgiving, we are going to talk about the thing that we fought a war for our independence against—the notion of kings. And this morning I do so in the company of what I affectionately refer to as the “British delegation” or the “British Office”—the collection of ex-pats from the United Kingdom here at St. Timothy's, as the “British Office.”

The irony, I have found, is that it is us Americans who take a far greater interest in the comings and goings of “the Royals” than do the actual subjects of the King and Queen.

I mention all this because it's important to define our terms here on Christ the King Sunday, because the language is so loaded with meaning—past, present, and future.

As a refresher: “Christ” means “anointed” or “crowned.”

“King” can mean many things to our modern ear,

but, on this last Sunday of the church calendar, it is supposed to remind us about the authority and kingship that our spiritual ancestors had with the king and their God.

This relationship was closely linked in the Old Testament, and then one in the same in the New Testament.

We understand the term “King” differently, of course.

It either has a negative connotation, as a reminder of imperialism and hierarchy, and there are folks who want to change the name of Christ the King Sunday to “Reign of Christ” Sunday.

Or it has another connotation.

Since our modern kings and queens have little authority whatsoever, “King” does not conjure up images of authority and power, worthy of homage.

Since the modern constitutional monarchy is largely ceremonial, largely a matter of historical interest,

with no real practical application,

it's something that looked upon with respect, and maybe affection,

but not a tremendous amount of meaning.

(Here I am going to lay it on thick)

It's primarily an expensive habit that some people maintain for the purposes of

nostalgia or to keep the peace, with the dramatic and antiquated costumes considered worth it as a bit of sentimentality and togetherness.

SHIFT:

Do you know where I am going with this?

(This is not a sermon deploring the monarchy)

I worry that today people understand Jesus, Christ the King, in the same way.

That Jesus is historically interesting, worthy of some admiration, someone who is primarily attended to by people in fancy robes and outfits, but has no practical application for modern life.¹

By this point, you might think it would be helpful simply to retire “Christ the King” Sunday since we have folks who don’t like it:

because of the hierarchal and patriarchal associations granting someone too much power,

and other folks who understand it as a ‘nothing burger’ with no power.

But I would like to preach today and try to link our understanding back to its original meaning, if possible, and say how Christ the King, of course, deserves that honor, how we simply cannot live without him.

To do so, we might need some new images to help us conjure that up, to help us understand how we might conceive of Jesus in 2023.

So, I will humbly suggest some name changes to Christ the King Sunday:

NEW NAMES

The first is that we might call this *Brain Sunday*.

For most of us, if you say we are Brain Dead, that means we are not worth keeping on live support. I have a Living Will that says that very thing, many of you might have the same

My brain, for better or worse, is something that I depend on, that I need, that without it there is no life.

As Christians, we should say the same thing about Jesus, we say that Jesus is the King of Kings, Lord of Lords. We should sing Crown that Brain with many Crowns because we cannot live without him. I should believe that I am nothing but a “Vegetable” without my Lord Savior.

If that does not do it for you, we might give this Sunday the name of *Gravity*

¹ This sermon is indebted heavily to one given by the Reverend Francis L. Wade on November 25th, 1990, who was Rector of St. Alban’s Parish in Washington, DC on that Christ the King Sunday.

Sunday.

Gravity, obviously, is a scientific Law that we live with in this world.

You can argue with it, but you are bound to lose. It is something that makes all the difference in the world at our every waking moment, and our sleeping ones too.

To that end, can you imagine someone coming into my office and saying: “I used to believe in gravity, it really helped me when I played tennis and I like how it helped the pilot land my plane at Dulles last week, but one day I fell down and hurt my knee and it really let me down. I thought ‘How dare you gravity?’ Ever since then, I don’t believe in gravity anymore. I don’t respect or give homage to it at all.”

We would say in reply “You are a fool, you cannot wander in and out of a relationship with Gravity. Your life depends on you recognizing the authority of this thing that you cannot see but rely on existentially. You need to endeavor to understand Gravity, and your life will be better for it.”

Could we say the same about Jesus?

That Jesus is not something that we take or leave based on how we are feeling that day, or how high we are able to jump. Or whether or not it’s fashionable.

That, rather, Jesus is our lodestar, our Rock, our magnetic pole, our grounding force.

Now, I am not saying, of course, that we should worship our Brains, or worship Gravity. People did and do, of course.

People for eons worshipped natural phenomenon, the sun or the moon, some form of gravity. More recently, Descartes taught us to worship our Brains as “I think therefore I am” replaced “I am because God made me.”

Both are pretty good, as idols go, but they are not worthy of worship, they don’t hold a candle to Christ the King.

JESUS

Jesus: the Carpenter King.

The Peasant Rabbi.

The Suffering Servant.

The Would-be Zealot.

The Teller of Stories.

The Friend to Prostitutes and Publicans.

Someone once said about Jesus: “He was such a nice guy, you could almost think that he was God.”²

² Katherine Sonderegger Lecture

Jesus confounds and intrigues and appears and disappears in our lives. Metaphors ultimately won't abide, Jesus the Good Shepherd, Holy Wisdom, even in Christ the King don't adequately contain Jesus' majesty.

One of my favorite writers, Robert Capon, said this rather heretically on the subject: "I can love Jesus. As I said, I don't know about his Father. The only thing I can say about God the Father is that he's lucky to have such a lovable Son. Sometimes I think that if I had to go by his track record instead of just taking Jesus' good word for his character, I wouldn't give him the time of the day. And I don't know about the Holy Spirit either. So much hot air has been let off his name that if Jesus hadn't said he was sending him, I'd write him off too.

But Jesus I can love."³

CONCLUSION:

Getting back to where I started, I actually like the late-stage Royals, either the tragic-comic stage of the Windsor family or the so-called bicycle monarchy that the Dutch and the Scandinavians use. These are more down-to-earth monarchs, the ones who ride bicycles instead of carriages and have day jobs instead of an allowance.

Let's close with that image of kingliness: Can that sense of "kingship" help us to understand this Jesus?

Jesus is enthroned in heaven but also our personal savior right here with us at this very moment, in the breaking of the bread and in our pains and aches and joy and celebrations?

Today, we call him King. Christ the King. Lord of All Creation but also the Servant King. The King who wore a Crown of Thorns, who refused an Earthly Crown for the Cross.

The Romans did not know what they were saying when they said "Hail, King of the Jews" to a battered and soon-to-be very much dead common criminal.

If this is overwhelming to you, again remember that we are ending the Church year today with Christ the King Sunday, and we start the story anew next week.

Advent draws near, we begin in hope and in waiting, and we get to experience, week by week, the fantastical, grand gravitation pull of this brainiac God, Jesus Christ the King.

AMEN

³ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans., 251.