

“Christ the King”

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world...” John 18:36

Today, we mark the Last Sunday in the Church Year. Next weekend, the altar will be covered with the blue of Advent, and the sanctuary will begin to look a lot like Christmas...but we're not there yet, and today, we join with Christians around the world to celebrate what is often called “Christ the King Sunday.” On this final Sunday of the Church Year, we proclaim the ultimate rule of Jesus and we worship Christ as our King who sits in power at the right hand of God, and who will come again to judge the world and to bring us home. But before we sing our hymns of praise and turn the page to Advent, we need to give some serious thought to exactly what we mean when we call Christ “the King.”

You see, when we think of kings, our minds are usually filled with images of strength and pictures of power. Scepters and swords, shields and spears, eagles and lions and horses of war; *these* are the things that we associate with kings. Kings are protectors and punishers, and we are conditioned to understand the kingly office as a place of power. In many ways, this is the kind of language we heard in our first reading from Daniel where we get a glimpse of God's throne room and, we are told that, “his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire (and) a stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (Daniel 7:9-10). These terrifying images of power are exactly what we would expect from a king. *This* is a king to be respected and a judge to be feared, and yet this graphic imagery from Daniel couldn't be further from the picture of Jesus we see in John 18.

In this reading, we find Jesus in the headquarters of Pontius Pilate. Betrayed and abandoned by His disciples, and stripped of any dignity, Jesus had already been condemned by the Jewish leaders for blasphemy, and now, He was standing in front of the Roman governor to face charges of treason because He had claimed to be a king (Luke 23:2). And Pilate wasted no time in dealing with this accusation. John tells us that, “Pilate entered his headquarters...and called Jesus and said to him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’” The question must have seemed laughable to Pilate as he stood in front of this simple carpenter from Nazareth, and yet he knew that the Jewish leaders were serious, and that they were demanding action, and, on this day of Passover, he couldn't risk an uprising. So there, in the Roman Praetorium, Pilate interrogated Jesus about His claim to be a King and, in this strange examination, Pilate gets more than he bargained for. Instead of fighting the charge, or justifying His comments, Jesus describes the kingdom He had come to rule and He does it in these words: “My kingdom is not of this world.” And these are some of the most important words ever spoken.

You see, the kingdom Jesus came to establish has never matched the expectations and ideas of the world. And this was even true of God's people! In their history, the people of Israel repeatedly rejected God's rule. In the days of the judges, they complained to Samuel and demanded an earthly king so they could be like all the other nations around them (I Samuel 8:20). And their demand for a kingdom of this world plagued God's people throughout the Old Testament, as they were subjected to one evil king after another who despised God's Word and turned the people away from God's promises, and, this same thread of sinful pride stretched all the way to Pilate's headquarters where the Roman leader ordered Jesus to be flogged, and then put a crown of thorns on His head, dressed Him in a purple robe to further mock His royal claim, and then placed him in front of the crowd with this final question: Shall I crucify your King?” (John 19:14-15). And, John tells us, when this fateful question was presented to the Chief Priests, their response was swift and decisive: “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).

The Chief Priests and the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the masses who had witnessed His healings and heard His teaching, and even His own disciples – every one of them had abandoned Jesus. The kingdom Jesus came to rule was not what they expected, and it was not what they wanted, and they all rejected Christ as their King...and this is exactly our reaction as well. You see, by nature, we are also people of the world, and our desire for a worldly kingdom is as natural for us as our need for the air we breathe. We don't want to live

by faith. We want to be in control. We want to see progress and claim victory and enjoy success...and our sinful nature wants nothing to do with weakness.

And, we experience this need for power in a thousand different ways. Last week, we all felt this way as we watched the horrible violence in Paris and Mali, and, along with our sadness, every one of us has been tempted to seek revenge and fear outsiders. And we see it in our personal lives as well. In our families, we struggle to love our spouses and parent our children; and even in the completely secret world of our hearts, we find ourselves plagued with the same old sins week after week after week. Good people get sick, wicked people get promoted, and the world around us seems to be in a constant state of chaos. For once, we want things to go smoothly, we want people to be nice, we want evil to be thwarted, we want our work to be successful and our efforts to be rewarded. And we want a God who exerts power and exacts justice, who keeps suffering far from our door, and we want it all to happen now. And when it doesn't happen like we think it should, we question God and we doubt His promises and, ultimately, we reject the rule of Christ, just like they did on Good Friday.

And this is why His words to us today are so important. Jesus said, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). And the truth is that Jesus Christ, the creator all, the Son of God, the Ancient of Days, the Alpha and the Omega came into this world and took on our frail flesh, and He suffered punishment for sins He didn't commit, and He died a death He did not deserve...and He did all of this to save the very people who actively rejected Him. This is the truth to which the entire Bible points: "That he came to his own and his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). That, "Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God...made himself nothing...(and became) obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8). And that He did all of this for us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). This is not what we would ever expect from a King, and yet this is the truth for which Jesus came to bear witness! And it is the only truth that matters and it is the only truth that saves: That Christ the King has come to die for us and, in Him, we have life!

"My kingdom is not of this world." These words remind us that the way God chooses to work out His saving plan for us is never the way we would choose and it is never the way of the world. No, the way of the King, is the way of the Cross, and through His suffering, death and resurrection, Christ the King has inaugurated a new and perfect and peaceful kingdom and, as we heard today in Daniel, it is one that will never pass away and will never be destroyed. This eternal kingdom is not forged by scepter or sword, and it is not found in political candidates or stronger borders, or any other worldly sign of power, it is made possible only through the Cross. It is here that Christ has created His kingdom. In fact, that is exactly what we heard in today's reading from Revelation, where John tells us that Jesus, "loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom" (Revelation 1:5-6). And this kingdom is not gained by our effort; this kingdom is not achieved through our work; it is a kingdom that Christ alone has won for us and into which God has called us by His Spirit and life in this kingdom changes everything.

In a week that has challenged our faith and fostered fear surrounding the unrest in the world, I spent some time on the LCMS website reading about our missionaries in places like Turkey and Germany. As I scanned the articles and profiles, I came across a video highlighting our sister church in Germany (SELK) and their ministry to refugees. In the video, one formerly Muslim member of a Lutheran congregation in Leipzig said: "The peace that I have in (Christ) is most important, therefore I do not think of the fear anymore." This refugee's brief confession of faith points to the truth about what it means to live in the kingdom of Christ.

When Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" He was pointing to a reality that is by faith and not by sight; that transcends the temporary kingdoms of this world, where fear is removed and suffering is no more, and where the forgiveness of sins guarantees our place in an eternal kingdom that will never fade away. In the final words of today's gospel reading, Jesus said, "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). My friends, today, the voice of Jesus Christ – "...the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth" (Revelation 1:5) – speaks to you with a greeting of peace, and a word of pardon, and promise of life, and by the power His creating voice, TODAY, you are a member of His Kingdom and you can live each day free from fear and by faith in the name of Christ the King. Amen.

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