

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 29-C; 24 November 2019
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201911231901)

Christ the King

In nomine...

I. Intro

It's good to be king and have your own way;
Get a feeling a peace at the end of the day."
"It's good to be king and have your own world;
It helps to make friends, it's good to meet girls.

So go the words of the singer Tom Petty, of blessed memory. Doubtless Petty was inspired by the ancient Jewish sage Mel Brooks. They thought it was good to be king because that brings to one personal advantages, *benefits* that they might not otherwise receive. Often, to be king means to have one's whims and behaviors largely unrestricted by the conventional norms that govern the rest of our lives.

There are kings who are dangerous or erratic, like Saudi prince Muhammed bin Salman or the sovereigns of countries like Thailand or Malaysia or North Korea. Each of these is protected by their governments from the consequences of their own words and actions. They are able to act with impunity.

We might think of those who do not bear official titles of "prince" or "king" but are titans of industry or politics instead. We might think of other persons who blatantly used their power to abuse others like Harvey Weinstein or Joseph McCarthy. We might think of others who still shelter under the protective armor of their wealth and publicists: people like Mark Zuckerberg or Jeff Bezos.

Our world today remains full of kings: titled and otherwise, male and female, self-serving and, perhaps occasionally, benign. We don't talk about the King of the United States, but for all the fuss over the President, there's still some carry-over of significance.

II. A Fitting Summary?

That's why today's celebration and today's readings are so fascinating for me.

Today we complete the whole cycle of the church year. From announcement to birth, through ministry to death and resurrection and to reigning over the church into the present. Today we sum all of that up.

And today we not only complete the cycle of the church year: we complete the three-year cycle of the church's lectionary. Of all the stories in the Bible, of all the meanings of the church year, which summarizes everything that has gone before? How do we wrap it all up and tie it off with a bow? What is central? What is it that most clearly makes the point that Christ is King?

To judge by our Gospel reading today, it's the crucifixion that stands at the center of it all. And that's kind of shocking. I normally think of capital punishment and kingship as being at opposite ends of the hierarchy!

III. Jesus Mocked

The people in our Gospel account know that the cross is no place for a king. They taunt and antagonize Jesus! They see Jesus hanging on the cross and know that the Bible says such people are accursed. The people know that Jesus is not acting like a king at all!

The religious leaders of the people say, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" Messiah, of course, is Hebrew for the Greek term "Christ," and both of them mean "Anointed" which is what you do to signify a person's status as King. They mock Jesus because they believe he is pretending to be a King without the power to back up his claim. In fact, this pretender to throne has fallen into *their* petty power and also into the power of the oppressing empire from which a genuine king was meant to save them. The leaders know that Jesus is not acting like a king at all!

The agents of that empire hear the mocking and take it up as well. They use it to cast aspersions not only on Jesus, but upon all the conquered people of Judea. They cry, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" They find humor and contempt in their destruction of one who would,

supposedly, be the leader and representative of the Jewish people. They delight in affixing a sign over Jesus' head, proclaiming to all who pass by, "*This is the King of the Jews.*" *This* is what happens when you set yourself up against the empire. *This* is the potential status of any Jewish person. The Roman soldiers know what a king is: they know Caesar. The soldiers know what power is: they have conquered continents! They know that Jesus is not acting like a king at all.

Even one of the criminals crucified along with Jesus joins in the chorus. He joins with his oppressors, takes up the words of his own executioners, sides with the Romans, to make fun of Jesus. He understands the pain Jesus is feeling; he is experiencing the same thing. Yet the most important thing for him at the moment is to join the taunt to place even himself above Jesus. The criminal knows that power is what put him on the cross and that Jesus, suffering the same fate, is not acting like a king at all.

IV. What is a King?

And to all this, Jesus – doesn't say a word.

I wonder what Jesus is thinking. How strong the temptation was to step down from the Cross and say, "Why, yes, I can do that!" I grew up singing a song in church with a chorus that said, "He could have called 10,000 angels to destroy the world and set him free." And I think that's true. Jesus, God in the flesh, had that power. Jesus had that choice, that opportunity, that option. Jesus is Lord! Jesus is the King of kings! But Jesus restrained himself. He stayed there on the cross, silently enduring.

That reason, I believe, is because Jesus was demonstrating exactly what it really means to be king – according to God. We have all these human ideas about kingship, and they're lived out by foreign dignitaries and American robber-barons and movie stars. They're about status and power and getting your own way.

And if your life is about these things, then probably Christ the King doesn't sound very attractive to you. How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven!

Here on Christ the King Sunday, we read about how Jesus, the Messiah, the King of the Jews, God in the flesh, allowed himself to be crucified because *that's* what it means to be God. If you are poor, if you are lonely, if you are sad, if you are struggling, if you are addicted, if you are in debt, if you are ill in body or in mind or in spirit: Jesus is here for you. Jesus is right beside you, on the next cross over. That's what it means for Jesus to be the King God intended for God's people, the righteous branch raised up from David to reign and deal wisely, executing justice and righteousness in the land. The kind of King who does not insist upon being above the fray, set apart from everyone else, surrounded by a phalanx of bodyguards, an image impervious to insult, attack, pain or suffering. The kind of King who is present with his people in the midst of our pains and our heart-aches, our insecurities and our anxieties, our darkness and our depravities.

V. Because...therefore

Two criminals were crucified with Jesus'. One joined in the mockery of his own oppressors, trying to make himself feel at least a little better by putting down someone else. The other, however, is fascinating. He didn't say, "I repent." He didn't say, "I wish I had lived my life differently." He didn't even say, "I'm sorry!" He simply recognized who Jesus was, a king reigning even from the cross, and asked. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus response was immediate: "Truly I tell you, *today* you will be with me in Paradise."

Today is Christ the King Sunday. What an unusual king is Jesus. And yet – who really wants another of the more conventional kind? Isn't Jesus the kind of king we're all looking for? "It's good to be king," but it's even better to be the subject of a king like Jesus.

Because God is the kind of king whose reign is best symbolized by a cross, we too can cry out in our pain and yet with confidence, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And we know what the answer will be.

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