

From the Pastor's Desk of Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Schooley
A Sermon for Sunday, November 20, 2022 - Christ the King Sunday

On this “Christ the King Sunday,” I think we might need to start by laying all our cards on the table. The majority of us were raised in a country whose founding story involves defeating a monarch in order to secure self-governance. That’s going to impact how we receive this particular liturgical holiday. And just so you don’t think that I’m above all this fray, my wife works for the county so at least some of our bread is buttered by this expansive self-governance system we have in place. I mean, I like to joke that “Bri got one of them gub’ment jobs” but I have never once heard her say, “I’m humbled and pleased to work in my majesty’s court.” (Side note: Just how crazy would it be if that’s how my wife talked. You all would be like, “So, let me get this straight: He talks like a theology nerd who listens to too much rap music and she speaks only the Queen’s English? Oooookaaaaayyy”).

Additionally, as Church calendar days go, Christ the King Sunday still has that metaphorical “new car smell,” as this day was not created until 1925 by Pope Pius XI. For comparison, two weeks ago I shared that All Saints Day has been part of the Church’s history and tradition since the ninth century. That’s twelve centuries of history and growth and repetition. By comparison, Christ the King doesn’t yet have twelve decades to its name.

Both of these reasons – that is, both our cultural proclivity toward self-governance and the very newness of this liturgical day – make approaching this day a little bit different. It may also explain why – as I was surprised to learn during the Zoom Lectionary study this past Monday – this church does not have much of a history of acknowledging and celebrating this day. That little fact radically changed my intended approach for this sermon. As such, this sermon might prove a little more rudimentary than typical. It also leaves me feeling as though I have to justify adding a liturgical day to the life of this congregation. After all, you’ve proven yourselves a remarkably faithful and fine congregation without Christ the King Sunday, so why mess with that? Well, I hope to demonstrate how Christ the King Sunday can be a real support to what we’re doing as a family of faith here at FPC-BG.

To begin to help us understand the importance of this day, we must attend to why Pope Pius XI created the day in the first place. It was 1925 and the Pope was concerned for what he was seeing all around the world – namely, rising secularism in the West, rising Communism in Russia, and rising fascism in Italy and Spain – both of which would serve as harbingers to the German fascism of Third Reich Germany in the subsequent decade. With the winds of all these prevailing ideologies growing stronger, Pope Pius sought to remind all God’s people of who the one true King really is. He sensed that God’s people were losing faith – like actual, lived faith and not the emotion of it – in God’s reign and rule. They were – like Israel before them – trying to be autonomous from their

King and the result was a foreboding sense of doom. Well, if you know anything about what has happened over the last 97 years, Pope Pius’ instincts were pretty spot on. The Holocaust, World War Two, the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War, and now the present era of terrorism all share one thing in common – Christ was definitely not regarded as the King in the midst of these things.

Yet for all its failed efficacy in altering these historic and contemporary outcomes fully acknowledged, I’m still head over heels in love with what Pope Pius attempted here and I pastorally commend this approach to us even to this day. For what Pope Pius saw was a bevy of political problems, but he chose to respond liturgically. The Pope provided liturgical responses to political problems. Or, put differently, a liturgical response to a political problem is proof that Christ really is King. To approach political problems on their own terms is to trust that the problem isn’t in the terms themselves. And that may be a foolish assumption to embody. I want to slow down here and make sure we understand this point well. Many of our worst social and political problems can’t be solved with social and political tools. We are not all just voting in the “right way” away from a utopian world.

This, by the way, is why the so-called “Moral Majority” or “Religious Right” is doomed for failure. It’s why I’m not one of these sorts of conservative Christians. I know I’m progressive, but it is not by instinct or disposition, but rather by conviction. Indeed, my instincts – having been raised poor in a rust belt town – are all rather conservative. And my disposition is generally one that is hurt and angry. If you tracked political polling after the election, you know that “poor, hurt, and angry” makes up a decent portion of the electorate. I’m not alone. Yet what Christ the King Sunday does for me, personally, is remind me that “poor, hurt, and angry” makes for an exceedingly subpar Regent in my life. I need a King beyond that pale. I need – and maybe you need – someone who elevates your life. If so, then we might all benefit from learning to think about liturgical solutions to political problems, because just trying to address political problems on their own terms – even if we’re trying to be progressives about it – is doing little more than just mimicking the Religious Right. Put differently, I have hopes for the “Religious Left” to be more than the “Religious Right” just without their snarl in our voices.

We’ll return shortly to liturgical responses to political problems, but first we have to engage the character of our King, which is where our two readings are so helpful. For far from the rich, bloated King who sends lowly boys to fight his battles and keeps lowly girls to satisfy his whims, God’s Kingship is understood in more nurturing, caring terms. For example, in Jeremiah, God’s Kingship is compared to that of a shepherd – the quiet servant to a flock of vulnerable creatures. Just so were clear on the metaphor, *we* are those

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vulnerable creatures who, as Psalm 46 makes clear, find our refuge and strength in our God-King. And that Psalm is a perfect manifestation of a liturgical, or holy, response to political problems. Just look at its content: Verse six says “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter” – that is an apt description of political discord – and in response we hear “he utters his voice, the earth melts.” God’s Kingship will melt political discord. This isn’t a God, therefore, who thinks we just have to “get out the vote” or, for those of us in the MTV Generation, “Rock the Vote.” God isn’t nibbling away at God’s fingernails on election night (and the ten nights following!) wondering if good will conquer evil. God, instead, gathers the vulnerable flock, nurtures them as a good shepherd, and then speaks a divine peace that melts all evil where it stands.

But what about this idea that we should follow Pope Pius’ lead and provide liturgical responses to political problems? Well, I think that’s about reframing and reappraising that which we’re already doing in worship as a way of training us to be citizens of our God-King. I think Pope Pius’ great hope was that if all Christians regarded their divine citizenship over their land-mass-and-border-wall citizenship, then all that secularism, Communism, and fascism would just melt away. Again, history demonstrates that didn’t happen, but the first part of being a citizen in the Kingdom of God is to trust holiness over efficacy. A sword, after all, is a pretty effective tool, but it is rarely a holy one. So, let’s think about just the normal worshipping life of our congregation, but in terms of this life being a liturgical response to our world’s many political problems.

This past Wednesday, the Green Team led a wonderful discussion about how to use our outdoor green space. One of the things you’ve all done in the past is to intentionally move worship outdoors that we might experience the glory and grace of God’s creation. Indeed, the Green Team understands these outdoor services as more than mere novelty – novelty is *not* a virtue in the Kingdom of God; if you want a novelty item, just do your Christmas shopping at Spencer’s – rather, our outdoor worship is our liturgical response to the political problem of environmental degradation and global warming. Worshipping outdoors reclaims that space as part of our King’s Kingdom and not as base resource for our own manipulation and exploitation.

Or, consider last week’s Stewardship Sunday and every Sunday’s offering. This is our liturgical response to the social problem of greed and the political problem of income inequality. We stand against the injustices built structurally into capitalism by sharing our time, talents, and tithes for the benefit of all. In a world built on each getting their own, we embody the divine practice of investing in people.

Or, and maybe most significantly, we will celebrate Communion with our King later in this service. This meal is clearly a liturgical response to

political troublemakers, especially when we remember that it was created on the night that Jesus was arrested by the political leaders of His day. That’s right, on the cusp of being a political prisoner, Jesus doesn’t rally His supporters, He doesn’t proactively have them storm the capital, He creates a holy sacrament as His last shepherding act for His vulnerable creatures, for you and me.

The list could go on and on and on, but the same outcome will attend – namely, that every aspect of our liturgical, worshipping life together is inspired by the Kingship of Jesus Christ. It is formed by Him that it might in turn form us to be more faithful to Him. And while we may at times feel despair that things aren’t visibly getting better, Christ the King Sunday helps ward off the temptation to become the Religious Right or to trust in the systems that are creating the problems in the first place. This day acknowledges that the world is in an uproar and is tottering on the brink, while also reminding us to trust the only One whose voice can melt all that evil. On this day, we are invited to humbly assume our position as our King’s vulnerable creatures, to find our refuge and strength in Him. For our King is the only one who will tend lovingly to our poor, hurt, angry lives. So let it be. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of our King,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.