

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”(Luke 23:38)

When my mother died, so very long ago now (1983), theologian Robert W. Jenson sent me a note that has meant an awful lot to Carol and me. It was just a few words, and if I recite it aloud for you, I fear that it will seem like nothing special to you. But here goes. The great theologian’s note went like this:

The ways of Providence are justified only by the Resurrection. But by it, they are indeed!

It is compressed theological language that happened to hit head on the sorrow of those days and to help cheer me up.

My aim in this sermon is to offer a variation on Jenson’s saying and to try to expound on it a bit, to encourage you in the ways of love. On this festival Sunday, Christ the King, here is my theme:

The ways of love, including the way of the Cross, are justified only by the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but by them, they are indeed!

When I say “justified” — the way of the Cross is *justified* only by the Holy Trinity — I am talking about the gift of human rationality. By all ordinary standards of human reason, what Jesus did was madness, only it was *not* madness, because Jesus took into account something we too often fail to take into account. I mean, Jesus believed that reality is on the side of love. He really did believe that in the end, love wins. And because he believed that love wins, he had reason to do and to suffer things no ordinary king would do or suffer.

Imagine a council of kings: eminent, strong, famous rulers through the ages. And imagine that

Jesus sits among them. He is young. His cross and passion are still ahead of him. He is in that phase of his ministry where some could count him successful. Crowds come to hear him. Some people even abandon their jobs and station in life in order to follow him, which is an impressive kind of loyalty indeed. So, Jesus has had some success so far, only he does not seem excited or impressed by his success. In fact, he hardly seems aware of his own potential to rule. So, the council of kings think him naïve. They count him a rookie king. And they try to talk sense to him.

“Jesus,” they say, “you have had some success so far, but your strategy is strange. The plain fact is, it is unrealistic.”

“Strategy?”

“Yes, strategy. Your plan, your notion for acquiring power — it’s not going to work. For one thing, you pay too little attention to the power holders who could help you. In fact, you spend too much of your time with insignificant folk: with the poor, the grieving, the sick, the sinners, even with mentally ill people.”

“I have no strategy.”

“That’s for sure. We’re glad you admit it. And we will help you. So, we’ve already told you one of your problems: you are a friend of sinners and lowly folk, when you should be courting the rich and powerful. Now, let’s talk about the importance of appearances. You look and dress humble. How can you expect people to be drawn to you when you hardly shine at all? I mean, look at King Midas there. Now that man knows how to dress. He has gold all over him. Compared to him, you look dull. In fact, you look like look an ordinary man, like a carpenter or something.”

“I am a carpenter.”

“No, you *were* a carpenter. Now you are a

king in the making. So, let's continue with our lessons in how to be a king. Consider this: Not only do you dress in a plain way, but you do not have a proper castle. You do not have a proper cathedral. Why, Jesus! You do not even have a proper house. Even birds of the air have nests and foxes have holes, but you have nothing! You have nowhere to lay your head. How can people respect you when you do not even have a nice house? How can you expect people to respect a homeless man?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it."

"Right! That's your problem. You are not thinking about the kinds of things a king should be thinking about it. So far, we have pointed out small things — your poor choice of friends and your carelessness about your castle and so on. But let's move on to more important things. For one thing, where's your army? How are you going to defend yourself against your enemies without an army? How are you going to impose you will on others without soldiers and navies and weapons?"

"I have an army. I have an army of angels."

"An army of angels! Now we're talking! Use those angels, and use them quick. That will be impressive. People will flock to you. Especially if you should end up in some impossible situation, use those angels to rescue you. What a glorious day it will be for you!"

"I do think I am headed for an impossible situation. I think I am headed for a cross."

"Well, that sounds pretty awful. Still, use those angels to rescue you and to smite your enemies. That way you will convert defeat into an extraordinary victory."

"I do mean to accomplish some things on that cross."

"What things?"

"I mean to forgive the soldiers who crucify me. I mean to grant paradise to an evildoer on the cross to my side."

"Do you mean to use your angels?"

"No, I do not mean to use them."

"Then, you will die Jesus."

"I do not want to die. I just want to go on loving others as long as my heart beats."

"You are mad, Jesus. You are insane."

And so the conversation could go. By ordinary standards of kingship, Jesus makes a very poor king. But let us dispute the conclusion of the council of kings that Jesus is mad. We can agree with much that they say about how strange the ways of Jesus are. But let's not agree with them that Jesus is mad. For madness consists either in the inability to see the truth of things, so that one lives in a dream world, or in the unwillingness to live in accordance with the truth of things that one sees. And by these standards, Jesus was not mad, but the most sane of humanity.

Jesus is the one person among us who both sees the truth and lives according to it: He is the one person on the face of this earth who understands that God is on the side of love and therefore reality is on the side of love. Indeed, that is too small a way of putting it. It is not simply that God is "on the side" of love, but *is* love. As the apostle puts it,

⁷Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. ⁸He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God *is* love. (1 John 4:7-8, my emphasis)

For you see, the great difference between this world's ordinary kings and Christ the King is not that one is more sane than the other, but simply that one sees something that others do not. Jesus knows that love triumphs and lives accordingly.

That is why the way of the Cross is justified only by the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But by them it is indeed!

The importance of this festival Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, is that the final thing the Church has to say to us as the liturgical year reaches its conclusion is that we are to be sane as Jesus is sane. That is, Jesus is to be not merely Christ the King, but he is to be King for us! He is to be our King and we are to be his obedient people. And as he walked in love, bearing even the Cross rather than forsake his path of love, so are we to take up our cross and follow on behind him.

You might have thought that Christ the King

Sunday is an ancient festival of the Church, but the truth is, it is a fairly modern festival. Pope Pius XI established the feast of Christ the King Sunday in the year 1925. He looked around him and saw various political developments which seemed to threaten the church's ability to claim the allegiance of Christians to Christ as their sovereign Lord and King. Dictatorships were arising in Europe and Communism was on the rise too. Also increasing secularism was tempting even Christians to doubt the sovereignty of Christ over them and over all creation. Pope Pius XI wanted to remind Christians everywhere that, though we may owe our allegiance to our family and nation, we first of all come under the gracious and gentle rule of the King of kings, Jesus Christ.

In this, I think the Pope was prophetic. The Twentieth Century saw the rise of rulers who demanded the kind of loyalty we can only give God, with the result that they plunged the world into horrors and holocausts and concentration camps. But these leaders rose to power because of the consent of too many ordinary men and women whose notion of power was closer to that of Hitler and Stalin than to that of Jesus.

Meanwhile, Jesus continues his path of love, as long as his heart is beating. You belong to him. He is your true King. And you should follow your true King.

In a way, this sermon is preliminary to a lifetime of preaching. A lifetime of preaching could well be devoted to the Christological content of love. That is, many a sermon could be devoted to the concrete meaning of Christian love in the day-to-day circumstances of life. And, God willing, I mean to work at that harder and with more clarity going forward.

But this sermon is also important. It does not tell us what the Christian path of love is in this modern world, but simply this: whatever that path is, that is the right path for you. And in a way, the preacher will never be able to get beyond the reality that *you* must be the one to choose the path of love in the context of your own individual life. What love means when it comes to, say, disciplining your children, is often a complicated and confusing matter. It is the kind of matter for which we could well use the help and insight of other Christians, which is why we are starting our Parents' Class down in the Undercroft during the Sunday School hour. That begins 10 a.m. next Sunday. But as you discern Christ's path of love, *that* is the path of sanity for you. The Council of Kings might disagree with you, but the way of the Cross is justified only by God, but Him it is indeed!

To this God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be the glory, now and forever. Amen.