

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/24/2013, Christ the King Sunday
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43
But Is He *Our* King?

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴²[The criminal] said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42, RSV)

We should cherish this thief on the Cross not so much because he gained an *insight*, but because he gained a *Saviour*. Somehow the man managed to fight through his exhaustion and his pain to perceive not only that Jesus was indeed a king, but also to entrust his poor, ebbing life into the hands of this king: “Jesus, remember me...” He had no money to give Jesus — none of the ordinary ways of gaining the favor of the king. All he could give was his voice and his heart. “... remember me.” He did well, and I want us to do well too, like him.

There are two sides to the festival of Christ the King. One is the political side. Here we rejoice that Hitler is not king of this world, but Jesus is. That is much better! The other side of the festival is the personal one: Given that Jesus is the true king of the world, is he *your* king? Is he *my* king? After all, even the devils believe that Jesus is the king. They know that because they know that Jesus has triumphed over death, which is their miserable captain’s greatest weapon. So, they know that Jesus is king. They just hate it! And they mean to oppose Christ the King as long as they can get away with it. A pitiful and foolish stance — but there you have it. They believe that Jesus is King, but are determined that he shall not be their king. But this malefactor on the cross both acknowledges Jesus as King and entrusts himself to Jesus. That is what I want for us: that Jesus should be *our* king.

So, there are these two sides to the festival: the political side and the personal side. Let me begin this sermon by briefly talking about the political meaning of our faith in Christ the King. Then I want to turn to the personal side. That is the side that especially concerns me as your pastor.

THE POLITICAL MEANING

“Christ the King Sunday” is the final Sunday of the liturgical year, which means that next Sunday is Advent — a favorite season for many of us.

The Feast of Christ the King is not an ancient festival. It was added to the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar in 1925 and was added to our Lutheran calendar in the 1970s. Pope Pius XI instituted the feast following the devastation

of the First World War as a testimony against the nationalism that had plunged the world into madness and death by the millions. He wanted to remind Christians that their highest loyalty in life should be to this world's real king, Jesus Christ. As far as possible Christians should try to live peaceably with all and to pray for our secular rulers. But the heart of the Christian should always aim toward Jesus, and if political circumstances should become so awful that Christians must make a choice between their earthly king and their heavenly king, then it should be with us as Saint Peter said long ago:

²⁹Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29, KJV)

This is the choice that cost Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other pastors their lives when they chose to obey Christ the King rather than Hitler.

So, the political meaning of this Sunday's feast refers to something objective: Jesus Christ is bringing his kingdom to this earth someday. Soon! I hope and pray, soon! Someday, all other kings will lay their crowns before Jesus, bend their knee before him, and acknowledge that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:11, KJV) In this sense, Christ the King Sunday celebrates an objective fact. Jesus is the King whether or not we want him to be, whether or not we believe in him. This is not about us and our attitudes, but about the nature of reality. Jesus is the true King of the world. A rational civil order will always bear that in mind. A government of hatred will not last. A "thousand year reich" is just a horrible waste of time and humanity if it is out of synch with the true king, Jesus Christ our Lord. It is unworthy of human support.

So the political meaning of Christ the King Sunday is that our communities are at their best when they manifest something of the love of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

PERSONAL MEANING

Now, let's turn to the *personal* meaning of Christ the King Sunday. Jesus Christ is the true king of the world. But is he *our* king? Even now, in our daily deeds, do we want Jesus to be the king of our lives?

Well, a good beginning point in deciding this matter is to consider what kind of a king Jesus is. We know about lots of kings. We have read about them. We know something, for example about Julius Caesar and about Napoleon, about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, about Hitler and Stalin. Some are good, some are bad. What is Jesus like? If he is Christ the King, what kind of king is he?

This morning's Gospel Lesson is a beautiful story because it teaches us this great theme about Jesus: Even in the worst of circumstances, even when Jesus is drowning in pain and exhaustion, he nonetheless is a "friend of sinners." That was a charge brought against him early in his career:

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. ¹⁹The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. (Matthew 11:18-19, KJV)

Here on the cross, we find that the character of Jesus remains the same. His willingness to befriend the sinner was no product of a passing good mood, but was essential to who he is. Indeed, this story of the thief on the cross is the most beautiful illustration of a promise that Jesus had made during his days of freedom and ministry:

...him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. (John 11:6:37, KJV)

At the eleventh hour this malefactor came to Jesus, who in no wise cast him out. Indeed, he took him into paradise that very day.

In this story we learn that the immigration laws for entering the Kingdom of God are not all that hard. They are not burdensome at all. There are no numerical limits on those who can be accepted, no proofs of excellence required. Would you have Jesus as your King? Done! He is always ready to accept the soul that cries out to him. Simply see me and we will make your citizenship in the kingdom of Jesus official and public. Then you will have a new path in life. In your choosing and your declining, in your work and in your play, in your relationships to others and in your solitude, your path henceforth will be to serve as a loyal subject of Christ the King.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

This morning's story is from the Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. In Luke's telling of the story of Jesus, the sinners surrounding him seem to go from bad to worse:

... from the ordinary, undifferentiated "crowds" who went to the Jordan for baptism; through the tax collectors and those specifically designated "sinners," including a

prostitute; to evildoers put to death to death for their wicked deeds.¹

The other Gospel stories describe those on the cross as “robbers,” but St. Luke goes to the heart of the matter: they were “criminals.” They were evildoers, malefactors. This man promised Paradise by Christ the King was no good man somehow unjustly convicted. No. This was a bad man, who happened to encounter a good King and was saved by that King.

For you and me, then, let none of us say that we have fallen too far to be of any interest to Jesus. I know the hearts and deeds of many of you, and I think of you as good people. Yet I cannot know everything you have done. For all I know, at one point in your life you might have been a great evildoer. If so, you qualify for the kingdom of Christ. If you have been or are even now an evildoer, you are kin to the man saved on his final cross. For that is the kind of king we have: The true King of the Universe is merciful up all who seek him. We will have to give up our evildoing if we own *him* as our king, but that is okay. In our heart of hearts we know it is high time for that anyway!

LUTHER’S PRAYERS

I have little book I very much love called *Luther’s Prayers*. Martin Luther was a great man of prayer. His prayers reflected his love for the Bible. It was almost as if prayer was for him conversation with the Lord in which Luther played the polite and humble role: he first listened with all his heart to what the Lord had to say to him in the Bible, and then he answered back in prayer.

So, Luther’s prayers are based on sacred scripture. And to my mind, some of his most lovely prayers are based on the Lord’s Prayer. The Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, you will recall, is about God’s Kingdom: “Thy kingdom come.” That is our subject now: the kingdom of God. Many of Luther’s prayers about the kingdom lift up our distinction between the coming of the kingdom at the end of time versus the coming of the kingdom to us here and now. Here is one of those prayers:

Help your kingdom to begin and grow *in us* and daily to further and extend itself. Let not deceptive wickedness and inactivity subdue us in your service. Keep us from backsliding. Give us a firm resolve and ability not merely to begin being devout but to continue boldly...²

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 455.

² Martin Luther. *Luther's Prayers* (p. 30). Kindle Edition.

Let it be so with us in the confidence that the kingdom of New York City and the kingdom of our places of work, and the little kingdom we call our home sweet home will be better kingdoms to the degree that we are the true subjects of Christ the King, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.