

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/20/2016, Christ the King Sunday, Lectionary 34
Jeremiah 12:1-6, Luke 23:33-43

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

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Jeremiah 23. It is a text that speaks of a king:

⁵Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign *as king*... (Jeremiah 23:5, RSV)

This is Christ the King Sunday. We believe we know the One of whom Jeremiah is prophesying. He is speaking of Jesus of Nazareth — a true and righteous Israelite, a true branch of David. He is Christ the King.

It is interesting to note about our Jeremiah reading that, just as you and I can become frustrated with political and spiritual rulers, so can the LORD himself. He has infinite gentleness and patience, and yet judging by the Bible, he can reach a point where he has had enough. Then he speaks dreadful words of woe:

¹“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” says the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend *to you* for your evil doings, says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 12:1-2, RSV)

Political leadership is no game. It is an awesome line to be borne in mind by anyone who has the welfare of others in his or her hands: “... you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend *to you* for your evil doings.” Jesus Christ is a good king, but he is not a tame king. Let us not test him. For the sake of those over whom we have authority and for our own sakes, let us not frustrate Christ the King by neglecting our duties to others.

In my sermon notes in this morning’s worship folder, I refer to this day’s appointed *Prayer of the Day*. I love this prayer! Especially nowadays I am drawn to this prayer for unity among the people:

Grant that all the people of the earth, now divided by the power of sin, may be united under the glorious and gentle rule of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ...

I feel we could use it. It would be good to be united under the glorious and gentle rule of Jesus. So, I say, Come, Lord Jesus! Come soon! Come, Christ the King.

I have two points to make in this sermon about Christ the King. First, Jesus Christ is our sweet Savior. But, second, he is our Sovereign. He has the right to the final word in our lives, both in eternity and here and now.

Come Christmas Eve, the majestic words of Isaiah will once again sound forth in our church. We will take the prophet to be speaking of Jesus, the Christ Child born in Bethlehem. The great old words will go this way:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, *The Prince of Peace*. (Isaiah 9:6, KJV)

Two words here: The *Prince of Peace*. Jesus is a Prince. He is The Prince — Christ the King. But he is a wonderful *kind* of Prince: He is The Prince of *Peace*. If the times should be somber and threatening, it is good to picture Jesus as in love with peace. He will bring peace on earth, goodwill among humanity.

Let's begin with this last point. Jesus is our sweet Saviour. He is our Prince of Peace.

The thief on the cross in this morning's Gospel Lesson experienced that peace, even as he was dying. The agony of that man's death no doubt followed him to his final breath. But with his final breath, he was able to die having heard some sweet words from Jesus, dying along with him:

Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.
(Luke 23:43, RSV)

What an alteration of life for that man! A man such as him — a criminal, St. Luke says. Someone who in his crucifixion is "receiving the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41), the man himself acknowledges. There might well be blood on his hands and ruined lives in his wake. Yet at the end of his life, he reaches out to Jesus and is in no wise rejected. "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Come Christmas Eve, I will probably develop this first point some more: Jesus is this world's Prince of *Peace*.

But this is Christ *the King* Sunday, and so it seems fitting to linger today with the second of my themes: Sweet Jesus is our Sovereign. Jesus is a Prince, a governmental authority. He is Christ the King. The “government shall be upon his shoulder.” He shall rule. Indeed, it is best if he rule already – including ruling in our hearts here and now.

We have been through the recent Presidential election. Maybe you are happy with the outcome, maybe you are unhappy. God bless you in either case. As I said in last week’s sermon, whatever your feelings about the election, I hope you will be encouraged to believe that our Maker can take the result of our *democratic* choice and use it as a step along the way to his kingdom. In that sense, our democracy has not failed – neither now nor in the past, for here we are! Still marching on toward God’s kingdom.

But the thing is, we do not hope for a democracy — not even a perfect democracy. We hope for a Prince. We expect a “kingdom.” We expect Christ the King. It is an unusual political category for us Americans. We have the longest running democracy in the world. We are not used to kings. But we are headed toward One.

Jesus came among humanity as a child born in a manger – a child born to a village maid and to a carpenter. He grew up in an obscure neck of the woods – a humble town called Nazareth. He never had much money, did not go to college, had no military to back him, and he did not strive for wealth or glory. Yet he shall reign! His destiny to be the King of all creation is not vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of political campaigns, to polls, to votes, or to the Electoral College. He simply is going to be your King, my King. And would he be our King even now? Even today? I hope so.

In our First Lesson, Jeremiah speaks of the power of Christ the King to bring justice to the land:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 23:5, RSV)

As King, Jesus, will say Yes, and he will say No. He will say Yes to every generous impulse he finds in us. But he will say No to that which is bad in us. The LORD can command the mighty waves of the sea to keep in their place:

Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed? (Job 38:11, RSV)

Likewise, Christ the King will not depend upon police or courts or prisons. He will simply command the human heart:

Thus far shall you go, and no farther – not one step more
into meanness or injustice. And here your proud, but
sinful ways will be stayed!

Our Jesus is a prince, a king, even Christ the King. His reign will not depend on
the laws of the land or the cleverness of the attorneys or the whims of juries.

I am trying to speak of bracing things here. Jesus is sweet, yes! But Jesus is
also our Sovereign. Before him, every knee shall bow and every tongue
confess that he is the Christ (Philippians 2). He is Christ the King. At last we
shall have a President our hearts will leap forward to obey. At last we shall
have a ruler of whom we shall be proud. In our present world,
administrations come and go. One party rules for a while, and then another
takes over. Legacies are built or fail to be built. But we are facing an
everlasting king. Of the increase of his government, there shall be no end. His
administration faces no term limits, no vulnerability to foreign powers, no
limitation on resources, no personal vulnerability to sickness or aging or
death. The ways of Christ the King shall prevail. It is not simply that we hope
and pray that they will. Rather, his ways *shall* prevail. He is the King, our
mighty Lord, our Prince of Peace.

A few minutes ago, our sermon hymn was LBW hymn 179, “At the Name of
Jesus.” It is sung to that great melody “Kings Weston.” Recall verse 5. Let me
lift it up for you again. Let us treasure that verse as a personal application of
Christ the King Sunday to our own lives. Think of this verse as a little sermon
meant for you, for me. The verse goes this way:

In your hearts enthrone him;
There let him subdue
All that is not holy,
All that is not true.
Crown him as your captain
In temptation’s hour;
Let his will enfold you
In its light and pow’r.

Such an intention coheres with our nighttime prayer. When we lay our
heads on the pillow and we reach the petition that says, “Thy kingdom come,”
let us resolve that his kingdom will come *to us*, even now. In our hearts, let us
enthrone him. There let him subdue all this is not holy, all that is not true. It
would benefit our families, our neighbors, our land, and our world if we
would be loyal citizens of our Lord Jesus even now. It would mean that we
would be a more compassionate, sympathetic, and kind people. So, let us live
for him now, loyal subjects of Christ the King, to whom belongs the glory, with
the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.