

Christ the King
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
November 20, 2016

I make the preaching rotation months in advance, so I've known for quite some time that I would be speaking to you on Christ the King Sunday. And, I dreaded it. I give approximately the same sermon every year, and I think to myself: surely everyone has heard this before. Every November, we end the church year on this Sunday with the exhortation to remember that our only ruler is Christ. I could probably give that sermon off the top of my head. I usually add a few sentences about how we Christians live outside of nations and outside of time—our New Year (the first Sunday of Advent—next week), and our citizenship are different from the rest of the world. We are ruled by God and not by the powers of the world. You know the drill. We get these same themes year after year after year. Frankly, I was expecting it to be a real snooze. Let's just hurry up and get to Advent and Christmas.

I had these pessimistic thoughts several weeks ago, and since then, the United States has had a vicious, contentious presidential election. And we find ourselves in a situation where the suddenly most powerful political voices in the country seem emboldened to use political office to amplify institutionalized racial bigotry, nationalist xenophobia and the marginalization of women and sexual minorities. Our next crop of leaders seem determined to use the power of the state to surveil and capture the undocumented among us, the non-Christian among us, the refugees among us. Maybe Christ the King Sunday is not as boring as I thought. Maybe Christ the King is EXACTLY what we need to hear today.

It turns out that the church, in its wisdom, was right to remind us that we owe our allegiance to Christ first and always. And to Christ we will be called to account regardless to who currently inhabits the White House.

I did a little digging into how we got this peculiar feast into our church calendar. I had assumed it was a venerable tradition dating from the 12th century or something like that. Imagine my surprise when I found out that Christ the King was instituted in the Roman Catholic Church in 1925 by Pope Pius the Eleventh. It was revised in 1969 to be called “The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe”—that's quite a mouthful. It's only been observed by Anglicans around the world since the 1970s. Incidentally, The Church of Sweden focuses on the judgment part of today's Gospel and calls this Sunday, The Sunday of Doom.

This Sunday came to be because the pope was deeply concerned with the increasing secularization in the world and with the rise of nationalism between World War I and World War II. He was worried that the Christians of the world were bowing their knees to kings of the world, when our true master ought to be Christ. After these few weeks, I have come around to thinking Pope Pius was on to something.

Liturgically, there is something really interesting about Christ the King falling as it does on the last Sunday of the church year. For those of you who are a little rusty from Sunday School, the

church year is structured so that we follow the story of Jesus for 12 months, from Birth to Death to Resurrection and then into the Holy Spirit inspiring the mission of the early church. Placing the feast of Christ the King today is an invitation to remember, retrospectively, that this Kingship has been expressed by the church in different ways all year—from the signs in the heavens to the babe in the manger; from the ministry in Jerusalem to healings and sermons; to Gethsemane and the Cross. From the empty tomb to the fires of Pentecost landing on the heads of the Apostles. Through this all, Christ has been reigning, has been showing us a different kind of monarch, distinct from the power-mad rulers of this world.

Today we remember that our master is not Caesar. Our master is not Pharaoh. Our master is not the President. Our master is God. And God is a Lord unlike any earthly ruler we might imagine.

Our King, the Lord of our Church, so closely identifies with the plight of the poor, the thirsty, the sick that to ignore any of them is to ignore the very Christ we promise to serve. Christ is the King of the prison, of the soup kitchen, of the hospital ward. This is a King whose reign is evaluated, not in monuments and palaces, but in the humble places where the world is in need.

That's the thing about our God—the world strives to set up systems of unlimited power and domination, and God says that real power is in the tending of our brothers and sisters. The world says that a King is a master of armies, and our God says, a King is a shepherd, like we read in Jeremiah earlier. The world says that royalty is the birthright of a few, and God says that the royal priesthood is right in front of me in these pews. That is the way God works, my brothers and sisters.

This is why the world finds the Christian faith frightening. The early Roman Emperors trembled before this tiny sect who refused to bow down before the state. Resistance to the Nazi program found its most potent expression in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor who wrote that, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” The legal and moral landscape of this country was changed during the Civil Rights Movement by a Christian pastor who wrote that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” We are well served to remember our history as Christians—as a people who have put God's reign in the center of our community. Our ancestors have risked much to remain faithful to God our king—even when the world mocked that fidelity or made it nearly impossible to keep.

My brothers and sisters: you are citizens of heaven. You are subjects of a king like none on this earth. You are workers in a vineyard whose rules are different from the rules of the world—where the least are first, where the weak are strong, and where those who come late are paid a full wage. This is the kingdom of God; this is God's gift to us and our gift to the world. Amen.