

Last Sunday after Pentecost/Christ the King, Year C
Sunday, November 20, 2022
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Texts referenced: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

Friends, today is a special day in the calendar year of the church; a day with a meaning I invite you to think about with me, as it's a day I've considered special for only a few years now. First off, while it isn't the focus of what I've been thinking about this past week, today is the Last Sunday after Pentecost, which is special because it at the least means FINALLY we can get out of green and switch over to the blues and purples Advent. For the first 29 years of my life, this was the primary reason to celebrate this Sunday in which we find ourselves.

It was only after I became a church intern that my priest taught me that today is not only the Last Sunday after Pentecost, it is also Christ the King Sunday which my priest noted was as a feast day in the church calendar created to fight Nazis. I think he used that line to get people hooked; it at least worked on me. But he really wanted to teach that this special Sunday is meant to remind us that there are a lot of earthly powers and rulers which will fight for our attention and loyalty. Yet as the name says, there is no one whom we are meant to call King but Christ. It's a good reminder for us now and was particularly needed when it was first created in 1925.

My priest saying the day was made to fight Nazis wasn't exactly inaccurate. You see, when the day was made, the first World War, the Great War, the war which caused the death of somewhere between 15 to 22 million deaths had concluded in 1918, a war commanded by the nations of France and Germany and Great Britain and Russia and Austria-Hungary and Italy and more. During the conflict, as Italy joined the Allied powers, a man named Benito Mussolini coordinated with other leaders to create the fascist party. Mussolini eventually organized a coup: the March on Rome, declaring, "Our program is simple: we want to rule Italy." The fascist party and Mussolini took power in 1922 and in his words, led through the ideology: "All within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state." That ideology would proliferate throughout Europe and lead to the Second World War and more forms of fascism.

The Pope at the time, Pius XI, saw Italy changing from his place in the Vatican, saw that people in the world were giving all authority to the nations and leaders of the world. And so he instituted the Sunday of Christ the King, a day to remind Christians round the world that the ruler to whom we owe deference is not to be found in capitols and buildings of state, not in the powers that be in the world but rather the authority of Jesus Christ.

Now I'll add the caveat that I don't know I'd agree with Pius XI on quite a bit. If he had his druthers, I think he'd prefer it if everyone was Catholic. But I think he was right to remind us that Jesus was the only person we should consider calling king. And today's Gospel is a beautiful

reminder as to *why* we choose to follow Christ, whose image doesn't exactly match that of the world's rulers.

Our king is the man crucified with thieves, killed by the powers of the state who would denote themselves as the pinnacle of power. Our king is stripped bare and his clothes gambled over, who is mocked by the leaders and soldiers of Jerusalem, whose apparent kingship was ridiculed in that sign which read "King of the Jews."

Not exactly the image of power.

And we have plenty of images of power today that we can turn to. We live in a world where we celebrate celebrities and politicians, there are swaths of people who have been successful, who articulate powerful ideas, who seem like they know what they're doing, and who have the following of masses of people including us.

Why celebrate the ridiculed king of the Jews? Why follow the man hanging to death on a tree? For me, the answer came from a young person who offered prayer at UWM's campus ministry a couple of weeks ago. We were worshipping together and this person offered up a word for God's presence with the people of Iran. Now I hadn't paid attention to what was going on in Iran. My media diet was satiated with input about the United States' midterm election. But a quick google search detailed the struggle for political freedom for which Iranian people have been protesting since September, protests sparked when the Iranian government's morality police seem to have killed Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who was detained for not wearing a hijab. Since then, thousands have been arrested amidst reports of threat of execution for some captured.

The reason I choose to call Christ King is because I cannot imagine him anywhere else but beside those protesting Amini's death and the powers that caused it. I believe Christ stands with those who suffer as they call for justice, just as he stood on that cross beside those two thieves.

While the world's powers rule through abundance and power, the King we remember today rules from the Cross and beyond it. The person I would call king is the one I would see beside the struggling.

It is Christ the King who stands beside you when you are bearing your cross, who suffers beside you when you face the most difficult hardships of your life. When you face the powers of addiction, Christ stands beside you. When you fear coming out to those you love but in whom you fear misunderstanding, Christ affirms who you are.

When you face loss, Christ stands beside you. When you face good works which seem impossible, Christ is there too. It is not in those places of power in the world where you find Christ, but when you weep, when you cry out, when you encounter those circumstances of which feel impossible and bleak, beside you in those moments is where Christ yearns to be.

Christ is with you on whatever cross you have borne. And promises that he will never leave you, even when you feel desperately alone.

And so today we celebrate someone called a king who has not like so many ruled to accumulate power, to grow and become stronger. But rather, we celebrate someone who has always and will always give power away, who will always seek to empower those he loves and those in need. Amen.