

## **Gospel - Luke 23: 33-43**

### **Second Sunday After Pentecost**

Sermon 1.20.22

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Good morning, and Happy Christ the King Sunday.

Christ the King Sunday is celebrated as a Feast Day in the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches. It is not on the official calendar of the Episcopal Church in America, though it is part of the Church of England calendar. And according to the Episcopal Church of America website, it is unofficially celebrated in some churches. Places, perhaps, like Christ the King Episcopal Church in Valdosta, Florida, or Stone Ridge, New York. And yes, here at St. David's, we give a nod to this tradition.

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, also known as the Feast of Christ the King, was originally instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius the 11<sup>th</sup>. The purpose was to honor Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Maybe that seems unnecessary, but consider the context: With the fall of several European monarchies after World War I, secular nationalism was on the rise and Pius surely saw the instability that represented. In 1922, Benito Mussolini led the March on Rome and was subsequently appointed as prime minister of Italy by King Victor Emmanuel III. By 1925, political parties other than the new Fascist party had been eradicated and Mussolini was deep into achieving his goal of dictatorial authority over a totalitarian state. The Vatican was not established until 1929, so certainly Pius felt vulnerable sitting in the middle of Rome in the midst of all this political upheaval. Pius originally declared that Christ the King Sunday would be celebrated on October 30, the same day that Mussolini took power. Pius sought to remind the faithful that while governments come and go, Christ reigns forever.

Never has that lesson been more important than in our secular life here in the US today.

With the recent passing of Queen Elizabeth, there has been speculation that the best known monarchy, that of England, may soon be a thing of the past. In fact, there are just 43 sovereign nations left with monarchies, and most are basically ceremonial roles, similar to England. Only five are still absolute monarchies, and interestingly, one is Vatican City.

Back in the day, though, we know that kings had absolute power, and the history books are full of stories of magnanimous rulers – as well as the despicable behavior of those who took advantage of that power.

Here in our nation, founded of a struggle against a distant and oppressive monarchy, we have a unique fascination with and, at the same time, discomfort with monarchs. We balk against monarchies in this culture because our government is based on the idea that the people should choose their representatives. By contrast, a monarchy is a “political system based upon the undivided sovereignty or rule of a single person.”

Perhaps our fascination is limited to an interest in the fashion trends Kate Middleton is wearing, but I believe we also sometimes long for the simplicity a monarchy represents. Just think, you'd never have to hear another ad for Patty Murray or Tiffany Smiley or any other political figure!

Many years ago, I read an opinion piece stating that President Reagan should have been a king rather than a President. The columnist pointed out that President Reagan was congenial and conducted himself with great ceremony, but it was unclear who was running the night shift.

Opinions about Ronald Reagan or any other political figure aside, I think we expect our leaders to be both omnipotent and inclusive. We want them to be statesmen and women and to be strategists. We expect them to solve monumental problems that have been with us since the dawn of time, but no two of us seem to be able to agree about the solutions.

Politicians make bold promises because we require them, but there is no way they are going to deliver the answers we seek, so we throw out the bad guys, since they aren't doing anything, and we start over again.

At the same time, and whether our leaders accomplish everything or nothing, we must make decisions daily – for our own welfare and for the welfare of others. Heads of state, heads of small businesses, people in middle management in corporations and yes, even us lowly peons have opportunity to make decisions that have real impacts. And that can be daunting, can't it? We've just come out of a political season that reached new heights – or depths – with its stark choices and apocalyptic predictions. All around us, in 30 second commercials and mailers, text messages and web banner ads, we heard snap judgments made, and we were pressured to judge accordingly. We heard we would all be victims of violent crime if we didn't make this choice and oh, by the way, we'd all succumb to the effects of climate change if we didn't make that choice. As Joe Jackson sings in the lyrics from "It's All Too Much:" "I'm so free it's driving me insane!"

So maybe a king would be simpler. And certainly, during Jesus' time on earth, a king was really the only leadership role people could relate to. Today? We're a bit more cynical about our leaders. Let's face it: crowns and scepters and Oval Offices aside, our experience tells us that human leaders are fallible.

*Spoiler alert: I'm going to venture into opinion land here. My aim in doing so is not to get you to agree with me; rather, I think it illustrates my point about Christ the King. Earlier, I mentioned that In the 1920s, there was a resurgence of secular nationalism. Today we have another political movement in America, that of Christian nationalism. Christian nationalists subscribe to the notion that God has somehow anointed the US above other nations, and that rather than embracing freedom of religion here in America, only the Christian religion should be favored.*

*What's wrong with that? As a Christian, perhaps I should embrace the idea. But a recent study on religion, conducted by Pew Research, states that identification with Christianity is declining in the US. In 1972, 90 percent of Americans identified as Christians. Today, that figure is only 64 percent. So this movement disenfranchises a third of our population from the get-go. But more worrisome to me? It somehow "anoints" our system of government. And that goes against this notion of Christ the King. It certainly goes against our core belief that God is the god of all of us. Everyone, whether we're American citizens or Pakistani nationals or poverty-stricken immigrants from Mexico or Guatemala. In one form of the Episcopal Prayers of the People, we pray to God for those "whose faith is known to you alone." I love that line, because it reminds us that we are not judge and jury of the "right" faith. That's God's job. Throughout the gospel of Luke, we see Jesus reach out to those on the margins and we are asked to do the same. So I reject the idea that we should marginalize a third of our citizens.*

Instead, I propose to nominate Jesus as king. Or president, or prime minister, or whatever title you'd like that conveys ultimate power. Allow me to make my case. First, he has the bloodlines, being the son of God and all. A quick glance through our Sunday readings, and indeed, any page of the Bible, teaches us what else this nominee delivers. He is a firm leader. Some may consider him vengeful and even wrathful. Last week we heard in Luke 21: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." His wrath may indeed will out against the temporal world. But as Pius pointed out in creating the feast of Christ the King, these earthly governments really aren't the point. Instead, we heard in Psalm 46 this morning: "The nations make much ado, and the kingdoms are shaken; God has spoken, and the earth shall melt away."

And what about all that power here on earth, the power that may be used for good but can and has certainly been used for evil? I nominate Jesus, because he is the leader who will level the playing field. The Beatitudes, which we just heard on All Saints Day, remind us: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." That's a problem politicians have been struggling with since politicians were invented! Problem solved.

What about crime? Will this king protect us? Last week, we heard from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke: "...they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." Today In Paul's letter to the Colossians we heard: "He has rescued us from the power of

darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”  
Yes, Jesus delivers on public safety.

Leaders throughout history have died for various causes. But this Jesus? He died for all of us. Everyone, including those whose faith is known only to him. And in our reading from Luke today we are reminded that he forgives all of us who are, by our sins, complicit in his crucifixion.

Jesus is king of THAT kingdom. The one that makes kings – and all the other politicians here on earth – irrelevant.

The real key to simplifying our lives isn't a monarchy here on earth. Nor, with apologies to all those recently elected, is it our nation's – any nation's – government. Render unto Caesar and all that stuff, but for me? I'm listening to a different drummer. His campaign pledge is bold and beautiful: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

That's something no politician can promise, no monarch can deliver. Today you will be with me in paradise.

All hail to the king! Or, in American parlance, all in favor, please signify by saying Aye.

Amen.