

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

Christ the King

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, Psalm 93, Revelation 1:4b-8, John 18:33-37

St. Paul's Episcopal Church

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“Are you the King of the Jews?” In these seven words, Pilate asks in a very direct way what so many had asked of Jesus over and over again in his three years of serving the poor and healing the broken. Who are you? By what right do you have power to do the things you do? Who gives you this power to do these things? Jesus lived his life in such a way that provoked questions like these time and time again. And in this scene with Pontius Pilate, Jesus is interrogated again to identify himself. And how does Jesus answer this question asked from the seat of Roman rule and power: “My kingdom is not from this world. [...] [M]y kingdom is not from here.” He then goes on to say: “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” I find it kind of odd that we title this day the feast of Christ the King when Christ does not even identify himself as such, but rather simply accepts the title with which he has been accused. But in this answer, Jesus does get at something very important in identifying who he was, who he is, and what makes up the Kingdom in which he rules. We’ll come back to that in a bit. But first, why this feast of Christ the King that we mark today?

The Feast of Christ the King is the newest major feast in the Christian calendar. It was instituted in 1925 by the Roman Catholic Church and adopted by other mainline Christian traditions like ours, at a time when much of the world was repairing and rebuilding after the first world war. It was also at a time when there was a major rise in secular ultra-nationalism combined with an eventual failing confidence in social and political systems that had upheld human society for a long time. In many ways, 1925 looked very similar to our own time. The Church instituted this feast to remind the faithful of who is really in control, whose kingdom ultimately rules. Following the answer of Jesus to Pilate, this feast still stands to remind us all that God’s Kingdom is not of this world.

And how is God’s Kingdom, this Kingdom over which Christ reigns, not of this world? We get a glimpse into the makeup of this Kingdom in the reading from Revelation today. And I don’t want us to miss how radical it is. The readings says, “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever.” In the Greek, the actual word is “kings”. In God, we are all made kings. And what are the implications if we are all made kings? In Episcopal priest Adam Bucko’s new book “Let Heartbreak Be Your Guide”, he explains, “If we are all kings and queens, as the Bible seems to assert, then the idea of some of us ruling over others shifts drastically because, “If everyone is royalty, then on some level, when it comes to the interpersonal and political spheres, no one is.” Positions of power, then, are envisioned in terms of their responsibility to nurture and protect” and “not a license to abuse and exploit.” In other words, God’s making us all royalty is a dramatic restructuring of our

world- if we are all granted royal status, then no one can lord power or control over another. And not only that, but we all have an explicit responsibility to care for each other and for our world.

We often speak of our work as Christians being about building up the Kingdom of God. But, friends, the truth is we ARE the Kingdom of God. We are not passive participants. By the very virtue of our baptism, we are citizens of this Kingdom that is not of this world. As Christians, we are citizens of a country where, as the prayer book says, “no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love”. When we worship, we don’t just “attend”. We gather to proclaim something bold and radical to the world: We gather here today and every Sunday to proclaim that this Kingdom of God made up of you and me and all the baptized is built not on power but on sacrifice. Its foundation is not made up of control but sharing. It’s building blocks are not self-concern and greed but love and care and compassion. Its roof is not shingled with fear and self-protection, but self-giving. Its walls are not a fortress to keep other out, but its walls are justice and mercy and peace, and those walls welcome all into this Kingdom. Friends, this Kingdom made up of all of us and ruled by Christ is indeed not of this world. And when we gather here week after week, we proclaim this good news to a world that so, so desperately needs to hear it.

On a day off a few weeks ago, I decided to explore a new, for me, small Ohio town. I chose Oberlin to explore on this day in particular. And I have been excited to tell you in this sermon that on that trip, in a gallery in the Allen Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio, I stumbled upon a map of the actual Kingdom of God, I kid you not. In an untitled piece, U.S. artist David Wojnarowicz had recreated a map of the world by gluing together ripped up pieces of a paper map. In some comments on his piece, the artist stated- “By ripping the map into pieces, I’ve suddenly erased all these borders and I’ve completely joined opposing governments.” In his piece, by removing borders, Wojnarowicz had reconciled nations, some of which are even actively at war. The artist had recast the concept of nations of the world as being in communication, in communion with each other. Though the artist did not mention Jesus, I couldn’t help but wonder if I was actually looking at a map of the world in which Jesus could now claim to be a part of.

Friends, in a time when our world is looking for some solace, some peace, some answers, I think we have an incredible gift to offer them this day. On this Feast of Christ the King, we can offer them a vision of a Kingdom of God that looks so different from the trappings of earthly kingdoms. We can invite them into this Kingdom, and work alongside them in building up this Kingdom of God, ruled by Jesus, where all are fed, all are named as holy, and all are loved. As one of my favorite hymns says, “Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word. Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace, let this house proclaim from floor to rafter. All are welcome in this place.” All are welcome in this radical Kingdom of God, ruled by the very source of love, Christ the King.