

Christ the King (C). November 20, 2016. Luke 23:33-43.

There is an easy sermon to give today. It goes like this: today is Christ the King Sunday, a day that reminds us that we are all one people, under one lord. So, for all the division in this country and the fear and the anger, we can at least all take comfort in Jesus Christ being our common king. Jesus is a king above our political and economic divisions (so this sermon goes)—in fact, he's so far above them, that it is difficult to see how he has any relevance to how, and for whom, we live our lives. This sermon may have a pinch of truth to it, but it costs us nothing and gives us very little.

Christ the King Sunday was invented for a political purpose. Specifically, to undergird the power of the pope against the growing nationalist movements in Europe in the 1920s. This particular need has probably fallen away from our list of priorities, but the Feast almost accidentally uncovered a long-lasting truth: that the hierarchy of our loyalties tends to go askew, or at least to get blurry. We have to be reminded of them. There is a critical edge to the day that we cannot faithfully ignore. And so we must resist the primrose path to bland comfort. This, today, is not a dress rehearsal for Thanksgiving Dinner with the extended family, where most of us will do anything just to get through the meal without getting Uncle Walter started. The church, the gospel, God are making claims on us, and we have to wrestle with them honestly, even if it makes us all a bit uncomfortable.

And so on a day when I might end up either angering or disappointing everyone, let me say this: each of you is a beloved child of God. I think God cares very much how we live our lives, what we work for, what kind of communities we build. But God's love is not impeded by your politics, or your anger, or your stunned numbness, or your fear. God's love is not dependent on the adequacies of your preacher, your standing in the eyes of the government, or whether you voted the way most of Oak Park did—except on the pool referendum, where the Almighty brooks no deviation from the norm.

So, let's dive into it. Today makes two big overarching claims that are presuppositions for everything else. The first came in our Collect, the prayer that opened our worship this morning: that Jesus Christ is the rightful King of kings and Lord of lords. The truth at the heart of reality is God's reign of love, calling forth our true selves to dance in the joy of that gentle rule. And the second claim today makes is that this true reign of Christ is exemplified by the story of the crucifixion. This is an incredibly radical claim to make—as the images flood in of America's icon of leadership seated in a gold throne in a golden room, the church counters with the Son of God on a cross. This is the Christian image of a king. It is radically counter-cultural and deeply challenging.

What stood out most to me on this reading of the crucifixion is how many times people in this scene call on Jesus to save. The leaders derisively encourage him to save himself, as he had others. The soldiers do the same. And finally, one of Jesus' companions in crucifixion, with derision but also I think a tiny slice of desperate hope, calls on him to save all three them nailed up there on those trees.

And so we have to ask, whom does Jesus the king save in this story, and how? By most of our normal political standards, he doesn't seem to do much saving. He dies. The criminals surrounding him die. The government successfully executes all three of them. But I would like to suggest that there is still plenty of salvation going on in the place called The Skull. When God doesn't do what we expect, chances are that it's time to change our expectations. How does Jesus save? He does not strike the undoubtedly wicked soldiers and religious leaders dead and then spirit the condemned off to the Garden of Eden in a whirlwind of rainbows. He does not miraculously undo the grief of his family and friends. He does not make martyrdom a relic of religions past. And this refusal in itself is salvific.

In his refusal, Jesus saves us from the false belief that survival equates to salvation. He offers us salvation from the cycle of reciprocal violence that keeps this world benighted and engrieved. If survival is not identical to salvation, then death is not the worst thing that can happen to us, and we are liberated to live truly, holding values such as love, self-giving, and mutual flourishing more highly than mere survival. And in contrast to all of our worldly governments, when death is not the worst thing that can happen to you, you are not obliged to kill.

Look at what Jesus actually does up there. He forgives: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And he invites: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” These are the quintessential actions of a politics that does not accept death as the controlling force; these are the constitutive actions of the politics of the kingdom of God. A kingdom that is based on the practice of forgiveness neither peddles oppression nor seeks retribution. Forgiveness is not a refusal to resist, to speak the truth; it is not a compulsion for lying down so as to be walked over. It is a commitment to reorient relationships from a cycle of mutual hatred toward a basis of mutual love. It is a refusal to be drawn into patterns of violence and hatred, an insistence on engaging in relationships on the basis of hope and love. Believe me, friends, a politics that relies on forgiveness as one of its fundamental organizing practices is revolutionary. Not quiet, not passive.

And invitation. I am saying that Jesus invites the second criminal into Paradise, into the life where God’s reign isn’t met with crucifixion. A politics whose methods are based on invitation must avoid a certain vice and excel at a certain virtue. It must avoid coercion—an invitation cannot be given with a fist. And indeed, it is impossible to live happily in the kingdom of Christ if you’ve been forced to join. And if you will not coerce, then you must be able to persuade—which means that the citizens of Christ’s kingdom must excel at imagination. We have to be better at imagining and describing God’s dream for the world. I know this sounds ridiculous, but the people of Christ’s kingdom are called to write better poetry, to sing better songs, to write better books, to make more painfully awkward and risky conversations about what matters beautiful. When we cannot coerce, we have to dream so beautifully that people want to join that dream.

So, what does all of this, what I think today’s text is telling us about the politics of Christ’s reign, have to do with what’s going on in our world today? First, the hatred and bigotry and vulgarity of the election just past has not changed the church’s mission. Our mission is the same today as it was on November 7, though it is apparent that we have not been fulfilling that mission well enough. We are still called to proclaim the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to tell this hurting world that God will never stop pulling life out of the grip of death. We are still called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and in every way be in solidarity with the poor. We are still called to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee. To take our stand with the endangered, the neglected, the most vulnerable. To see and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all God’s people, regardless of sex, gender, race, nation of origin, or sexual orientation. To work so that the image of God, imprinted on each and every one of our siblings in this world is not obscured by oppression and despair.

And we do all this by inviting people to join us in Christ’s kingdom, by dreaming the world we believe God wants so beautifully that even our enemies want to sign up. We do it without compromising on the ethos of forgiveness, insisting on turning our relationships and our world toward love, and resisting the enticements of hatred. And we do it from a place of being so in love with the life that God gives that we are not even afraid of death. When you’re truly in love, you don’t waste time worrying about a breakup. Martyrdom comes from loving true life so much that you forget to be afraid of death. Amen.