



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 29A, NOVEMBER 22, 2020
EZEKIEL 34:11-16, 20-24; PSALM 100; EPHESIANS 1:15-23; MATTHEW 25:31-46

ECHOES OF HISTORY AND CHRIST THE KING

Matthew 25:31-46 [Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”]

Today is Christ the King Sunday—a relatively new feast in the liturgical calendar. We bring out our festive white

paraments, sing our hymns of royal praise, and apply kingdom language in ways that resonate today, when pandemic

surges, societal uncertainties and a fresh lockdown force us to tease our circles apart from the delight of touch and taste and festive gatherings.

It's all a bit much to engage the revelry imagined for this feast of Christ the King. If we cast our eyes back along history's tenuous thread to the year 1925, December 11th to be exact, a papal bull was delivered by Pope Pius XI that established Christ the King Sunday. It eventually settled to its current place on the last Sunday of the church year, inviting us to pivot into Advent with all its hope and anticipation of Christ coming again in glory.

Anglicans adopted the feast, too, and so here we are, trying to make sense of its purpose and meaning in our lives...today, when only some thirty monarchs remain worldwide.

Perhaps the feast and its royal reference point are just too anachronistic, too patriarchal, too tethered to an outmoded faith tradition to find a centering point in it all. If that is how you feel, know you are not alone. This feast is problematic, as it has come down to us.

But as is the case with all human history, there is something that will serve us in our lives even now if we make the effort. As George Santayana famously said, "those

who do not remember the past are destined to repeat it."

So back to December 11, 1925, a rather dismal year is drawing to a close, one most would just as soon forget, prompting a well-meaning but heart-heavy pope to exhort the faithful to focus on Christ as king. Here are a few of the year's more noteworthy developments:

- In Italy, Benito Mussolini dismissed election results, dissolved Parliament and declared himself dictator.
- In Germany, Adolf Hitler published Mein Kampf, launched his political party, and created a personal security force known as the Schutzstaffel, or the SS for short.
- In the U.S., some 35,000 members of the KKK marched on Washington, and its 5 million members made it the nation's largest fraternal organization of the day.
- Newly elected President Calvin Coolidge introduced new isolationist and xenophobic restrictions on immigration, cutting rates as much as 90% from some countries.
- In Tennessee, the Scopes Monkey trial found high school teacher John

T. Scopes guilty of teaching Darwinian evolution, which had been outlawed by the state legislature as suspect science.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*, exploring the decadent underbelly of the classist American dream, social upheaval, and the fraying of American idealism.ⁱ

All this and a good deal more unfolded that year even as the heavy memory of World War I and the influenza pandemic lingered in the air.

Pope Pius was grieving the state of things, and as present-day monastic Silas Henderson writes, he was bemoaning the fact that the world was bowing down “before the “lords” of exploitative consumerism, nationalism, secularism, and new forms of injustice.”

Colonial empires danced in the post-war geopolitical landscape, new regimes bore down on whole peoples, as did the profiteering that fueled them, and Pope Pius called for Christians to seek a “King of Peace who came to reconcile all things,” and whose dominion was cosmic in scope.ⁱⁱ

The problem, of course, is that the iconic image of Christ the King the Church promoted, written with the paint of

worldly power, gathered into its orbit the unseemly detritus of human kingdoms which often measured dominion by a yardstick of battle victory, conquest, wealth accumulation, and nationalistic fervor. The pope unintentionally created a new feast that in large part circled back on the very behaviors he was trying to subvert.

It didn’t work, because here we are, and many of the same “lords of exploitation”—white supremacy, a distrust of science and classism are playing their salacious tunes even still. We still need an alternate vision sobering us to our current reality and the threats we face.

And it’s not just those people out there, those politicians, those profiteers, those evil-doers. The prevailing sin of our time is selfishness, as Michael Curry says, echoing Jesus, and surely we all know how selfishness seduces us to justify our behavior. “My precious!”

Theologian Deirdre Good wrote a book entitled “Jesus, the Meek King,” in which she suggests we miss the point of this king of ours, and the nature of his kingdom, when we juxtapose the victorious Christ of battle, with the meek Jesus, if by meek we take to mean tamed into submission and weakness. It’s a false choice.

Meekness, as a gospel virtue, intends something much more magnanimous and transformational than simple submission. Jesus, as meek king, comes as the consummately compassionate and merciful one, who is driven by philanthropic impulse (literally, a love of others). He chooses to relinquish power when he could do otherwise.

It is precisely that kingly image of meekness, set in contrast to the imperial powers of Jesus' day (and ours), that cast the alternate vision, that changed the world, and invites you to sit where you are today and ask yourself how his meek ways stir you to meekness. Not tamed submission or weakness, but compassion. Mercy. Philanthropic and unselfish giving of yourself.

This Christ the King will not make sense otherwise. It doesn't work if you hedge your bets.

The rich man wanted to follow Jesus, but departed empty-hearted, even with his pockets full. Meekness is much harder than any half-hearted pledge of allegiance.

If you focus on those people out there who are far worse than you, and whose comeuppance is necessary for your satisfaction, any hope of meek virtue in you will be strangled.

If your focus in your meekly efforts is on yourself, and your mighty meekness, (look at how great I am!), then the gift will be slip through your fingers like water.

The magic of this meek king's transformative power touches us when we open ourselves to the reality that every last soul is inherently good, worthy of our love, and of God's love, when we really believe that this king of ours really does come to reconcile all creation...that his dominion is cosmic precisely because no one is left out. But this king lingers in the margins, not the hallowed halls of courtly prestige and worldly power.

When we meet him there, in the margins, meekness becomes the quality that shapes our lives, unleashing a transformative power that will make talk of victory or conquest moot.

ⁱ This homiletical thread was inspired by a blogpost by Libby Howe <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/november-22-roc-matthew-2531-46>, accessed 11/18/2020. Some of the historical notes are from [1925 - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1925-1926)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.4lpi.com/blog/the-good-news-of-the-reign-of-christ/>. Silas Henderson, SDS, is a monastic priest in the Salvatorian order (Society of Divine Order) in the Melkite Greek Catholic Church.