

2024 Christ the King Year B

A few weeks ago Sandy led the Chapel Kids in a discussion about leadership. She asked them to describe the characteristics of a good leader, wrote each one down, and then asked them to prioritize them.

I was impressed by their responses: kind, fair, smart, generous...Sandy finally drew them around to the reading we heard that Sunday, and gave them words for what they were describing: a servant-leader. Someone who puts the needs of those they lead ahead of their own desires.

That doesn't sound much like our definition of a king, does it? And yet here we are, observing Christ the King Sunday. Our "patronal feast" here at Christ Church.

The "king" language is so uncomfortable for many churches that they have changed the name of this day to The Reign of Christ Sunday (not the 'rain' of Christ, as someone once heard it). The last Sunday of the Church year, when we acknowledge that every week we pray things like "thy kingdom come" and "he will come again...and his kingdom will have no end."

The hope—which sometimes seems unreal or foolish—that we are moving toward a day when we will be the kind of community that God wants us to be. One where

the leaders are fair, and kind, and generous... where they put the needs of the community ahead of their own desires.

But let's be honest—that's not going to happen with any old human king. Human kings are just so corruptible.

Take David, for instance. David is held up as the person who most closely lived into the ideal of a king for Israel. And it's true—he probably did get as close as anyone. He started out well, but by the end of his life even he basically failed. People don't like to think of it that way, but just look at the history. He had several sons (by several different wives) and it was the youngest who finally took the throne—because the older ones had all killed each other. That son would manage to hold the kingdom together during his reign, but after he died, it would split into two and never really be whole again.

Those last words of David include such a beautiful image: a righteous king will be like the sun on a cloudless morning after rain, allowing plants to grow and flourish and bear fruit. Picture all those drops sparkling on the green...such a refreshing image on a gray November day.

But then...well, he says something a little more honest: the unrighteous, godless king will be something else entirely. Thorns which choke out good growth. Thorns

which are untouchable and have to be cleared away with “an iron bar or the shaft of a spear.” Or get burned away in place.

Not so great.

It’s important to keep in mind that God had tried to discourage the people of Israel from having a king. God told them (through the prophet) that a king would use up all their wealth, and take their daughters for his pleasure, and send their sons to die in battle. The king would not care about them. God tried really hard to get them to see the truth.

But the people insisted that they wanted a king. They wanted to be “like other nations.” So God let them have what they wanted—and warned them that they would have to live with the consequences of their choice. Innocent people would suffer and ultimately they would lose the land to those kings of other nations. The ones they had so wanted to be like.

It wasn’t God’s intent that the people of God be ruled by a king.

And yet...here we are. Celebrating Christ the King Sunday. What do we do with this?

And *why* is the Gospel reading this passage from John that belongs on Good Friday? Why are we presented with a Jesus who stands before Pilate, refusing the title of King that will nevertheless be posted over his head as he hangs on the cross?

And what on earth is all this “truth” stuff Jesus is going on about?

I think the lectionary makes a mistake in not including the question Pilate asks in response to Jesus. Pilate asks, “What is truth?”

Because how we answer that question may be the key to unlocking this whole mystery of Christ the King Sunday.

Many years ago, when we as a denomination found ourselves in a time of upheaval and conflict and factions and bitterness toward each other, our bishop at the time reflected with us on this very question. What is truth?

And she said that the answer is both simple and nearly impossible to understand.

The answer is “Jesus.”

Jesus is truth.

Whenever we allow Jesus to be the ruling force in our lives, our decisions, the ways in which we interact with others, especially those who disagree with us, then we will find ourselves in the presence of truth. When we experience that flash of insight, sometimes lasting only a moment, that the king of creation hanging on the cross is *truth*, we are changed.

When we can discard all our definitions of what “king” means and remember that the king is meant to be the shepherd, the one who protects the flock, even when it means laying down his life for it, we will recognize, and listen to, and follow that voice that calls to us.

And we will see that there is no human being on this earth who can fill that role for us. We will understand that none of the empires of this world come close to the true kingdom of God.

A kingdom which is not defined by particular geographical boundaries or borders, but by the allegiance of our hearts to the One whose rule has no edges, no end.

We will remember that our king is a shepherd who leads us to green pastures, clean waters, who guides us through the dangerous places, the dead places, into a feast where even those we consider enemies have a place at the table.

And the king himself is both host and servant. The king feeds us from his own essence, so that we can become more like him.

Fair. Smart. Kind, Generous. Allied to the truth that is Jesus, “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead...who loves us and freed us from our sins...the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

This is the One from whom this congregation takes its name. May we continue to grow into the likeness of the one who is fair, kind, smart, generous. The truth that sets us free.

Amen.