

Christ the King, 2019 Colossians 1, Luke 23

So, a fun thing about today, for those who have been watching the series, is that Netflix is releasing the new season of *The Crown*. This has been a seemingly very honest and accurate depiction of the present Elizabeth the II's ascent to ruling as queen of England. Phil and I have been fascinated by it, and it's been quite popular. We won't watch it today, of course, as Sundays are reserved for activities related to church or the NFL, but we will watch it, just as we've been watching the PBS masterpiece series *Victoria*, on the reign of Queen Victoria. Being fans of the history of British royalty, you can imagine that we enjoyed many of the sites and tours of London this September for that reason. We were able to secure reservations to see the state rooms in Buckingham Palace, and that was amazing. We also thoroughly enjoyed gawking at the crown jewels at the Tower of London. Like many people, we probably have some rather romantic associations with royalty. And yet if there's one thing we've learned from watching these programs or reading biographies of royalty, it's that being queen or king really isn't all it's cracked up to be. In fact, *The Crown*, as it has portrayed the struggles of Elizabeth and her husband, Philip, and their children, including the present Prince Charles, has been downright depressing at times. Turns out that royalty isn't just about privilege, it's also about duty and obligation and expectations. The over-riding metaphor of this series, *The Crown*, is that the head that bears the crown bears a significant weight. Not only literally, as it evident when you see the crown jewels in person, but symbolically-- the weight of rule and responsibility.

This morning we are observing Christ the King Sunday, the Sunday that identifies Christ with royalty and crowns, and that rounds off and completes the liturgical church year. Alert thinkers will realize that next Sunday is actually the final Sunday of the church year, as Advent doesn't begin until Dec. 1. That's correct! I have risked the wrath of the liturgical realm by moving up Christ the King by one week, so that we may observe a Thanksgiving Sunday next week, just prior to celebrating that national holiday of gratitude. Obviously, I thought the festival of Christ the King was important enough to celebrate, even if a week early. Here's the thing, though, about this festival---it is probably the most recent of the regular liturgical days we observe, and there are many who would question if it should be observed at all. When I say that Christ the King is a recently created festival day, I mean that it's less than 100 years old. It was established in 1925 by a Pope. But in the 2,000 year history of the church, that makes it relatively young. Festivals like Easter and Christmas were established on their present dates in the 300s. All Saint's Day, which we recently celebrated, also has roots that are several thousand years old. So does the festival of Pentecost. But Christ the King is a newbie, liturgically speaking, and while it is generally observed throughout Catholicism and most mainline Protestant denominations, there are reasons that some might decide not to include it. The primary reason? Jesus never claimed to be a King. Not only did he never claim the title of King, he rejected it, when the crowds once tried to crown him king by popular acclaim. And when he is identified as a king in the Gospels, the identification is done in mockery by his enemies, as in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus identified himself in many ways; he said things like, "I am the Bread of Life"; "I am the Good Shepherd"; "I

am the Vine, you are the branches”; “I am the Son of Man”. But he never said, “I am the King.” So, we might have expected the church year to end instead on a Christ the Good Shepherd Sunday or a Christ the Vine Sunday, not Christ the King Sunday.

If we were to analyze the potential problems with Christ the King, we might identify two main issues: one is that the image is too small; the other is that Christ’s actual life turns the conventional notion of kingship on its head. And as it happens, our lesson from Colossians reveals how the image is just not good or big enough, and our lesson from Luke reveals how Christ’s kingship is utterly divergent from how we typically understand what it means to wear a crown.

How is it that kingly image is too small for Jesus? Perhaps it becomes more obvious if we consider our culturally contemporary equivalents. “Christ the King” rolls off our tongues reasonably easily because we romanticize royalty, not having any of our own. But, could you imagine having a Christ the President Sunday? Or a Christ the Prime Minister Sunday? Or even a Christ the CEO Sunday? All seem quite laughable and ridiculously off, don’t they? And yet why is that? Consider the presidency of the United States. One might imagine that the person bearing that title to be the single most powerful person in the world, don’t you think? Or at least in the top 3 or 5? And yet thinking of Christ the President just doesn’t cut it. We know all too well how very flawed and human presidents can be. We know how politics easily move from idealism to profit and power mongering, and how having power seems to corrupt and bring out the worst in people. Not that we haven’t had good and effective presidents, of course we have, but would we really compare God incarnate to a president? I don’t think so. And king or

queen is really no different, except perhaps to our ears, with that romanticizing from a distance I mentioned a moment ago. Monarchs or elected rulers are very much of this world's power structure and are generally committed to sustaining it; that really doesn't fit Jesus, who rejected this world's power structure and looked to turn the status quo on its head. And the words of our lesson from Colossians paints a far more cosmic and expansive picture of Christ than any worldly position could equal. The second section of this letter is a hymn, probably one of the earliest hymns of the Christian church, and it's a praise song, a hymn of adoration, for God's incarnation in Christ. As such it's kind of a Christmas hymn, as we celebrate the holy mystery of incarnation at Christmas. It may well remind you of the words from the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John, traditionally read on Christmas day: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." It might also remind you of the Christmas hymn we're going to sing in a few minutes, the ancient and beautiful "Of the Father's Love begotten, e'er the worlds began to be. He is Alpha and Omega. He the source, the ending He. Of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore." All of these are examples of cascades of words and phrases that try to capture what it means for an Almighty and Eternal God to become vulnerable within the flesh of a human child and join us in our reality. We read in this hymn from Colossians, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created....in Him all things hold together....for in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Very much like

those Christmas-y words from John's Gospel, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth." Incarnation, the cosmic wonder and mystery of God taking on flesh, so much bigger, wondrous, and awe-inspiring than being any elected official or wearing any inherited crown. In this way, Christ the King just isn't a big enough or good enough way to describe the God we know in Christ.

And yet he is described as a king in our Gospel lesson, isn't he? This lesson helps us to see how differently God views kingly power than we do. In mockery, the Roman officials have inscribed his execution cross with the words "the king of the Jews". And you may also recall that in mockery, they placed a crown of thorns on his head and a robe over his shoulders, while they were beating him. If Jesus is King, he's an utterly different kind of king than we anticipate or expect. His crown is heavy, not like the crown jewels of England, with sheer weight of precious gems, but rather heavy with the weight of bearing suffering and sin for the sake of others. And the small, but intense scene before us in our Gospel lesson demonstrates how differently Christ wields royal authority and dominion.

Let's take a moment to study how Jesus exercises his kingship, his power, in our Scripture lesson today. He does so with two words of mercy from the cross on which he is being executed, of all things! In the midst of unjust suffering and torture, his thoughts are on mercy for others. Not only on mercy for others, but mercy for others who we don't think deserve mercy. In verse 34 of Luke 22, Jesus asks for forgiveness for those who execute him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." We can imagine the scene, the three criminals being executed on the three crosses, soldiers

casting lots for Christ's clothing, jeers and mocking words called out by his own people, those he sought to save. These harsh, indifferent folks are the recipients of Christ's request for mercy. This is, and always will be, the gold standard for forgiveness. And in a world where the powerful generally leave their mark by acts of aggression, these words of forgiveness stand in stark contrast.

Then the scene focuses in more closely to just the three being executed. An exchange of words takes place between two justly convicted criminals and Jesus. One of them mocks, and the other is penitent. The penitent thief, somehow understanding something about Jesus' kingship, says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he receives this second word of mercy from the cross in our text: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." This is how Christ, as king, wields *his* power and exercises *his* dominion: acts of mercy for even the undeserving, and a willingness to suffer and sacrifice for the salvation of others. The crown that Christ bears is made of thorns, and yet is nothing less than the weigh of the world upon his head. That's the kind of king Christ is, if we consider that title to fit.

All of which brings us to the "so what?" question. What does it mean if Christ is King? Or if Christ is Lord, to use a similar title and concept? To proclaim that *Christ is King* is to make a statement not merely of faith, but of our relationship to the source of that faith. If Christ is King, or Lord, then we must ask ourselves: is Christ *my* King? Is Christ *my* Lord? And if He is, what does that mean for my life? Doesn't serving a King or Lord require commitment on our part? And an acknowledgement of the other's authority? And allegiance to their Kingdom? And even obedience to their rule? *Christ is*

King is a proclamation that shapes how we live in a way that stands in contrast to our society. If it isn't a proclamation that gives us pause, I'm thinking that we may be making it too lightly; to proclaim Christ as King is to step outside of the mainstream of our culture. It is to embrace a servant stance in life, rather than to seek a self-aggrandizing position.

One such person who served Christ as King is commemorated today on Nov. 17: Elizabeth of Hungary. Born into royalty in the year 1207 and married into royalty at a young age, in Hungary, Elizabeth experienced a spiritual calling from Christ that was in conflict with her royal status. Although palace law forbade it, she regularly smuggled food and supplies in her cloak out to the poor outside the palace, at considerable risk to herself. Legend has it that one time she was stopped and ordered to reveal what was hidden in her cloak, and that when she did so, the loaves of bread she had secreted there were miraculously turned into roses, and she was able to continue to her ministry of mercy. Risking her own health to minister to the ill, she died of illness herself at the young age of 24. Not many years in which to make her mark, and Jesus, executed at age 33, did not have so many years either. Certainly we could name any number of people, of *various* ages and ethnicities and so on, who have wielded the power available to them in a way that serves others and promotes the common good, with Christ as our ultimate example.

I believe our texts this morning challenge us in several ways. They ask us to recognize the enormity of the Incarnation, of what it means for God to have taken on flesh and lived among us---so much more than any earthly king could do. They also ask

us to reflect on how God exercises Lordly authority, not in amassing riches or power, but in extending mercy and forgiveness, even to those whom we consider undeserving. And in suffering for the sake of others, even for those who cause the suffering. No higher bar could be set for us, as we seek to live in ways that honor Christ as our Incarnate Lord and Savior. Amen.