

“A Different Kind of King,” Christ the King Sunday, Nov. 24, 2019, FPC Marshfield

Texts: Jer. 23:1-6, Luke 1:68-79, Col. 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week is the first Sunday of Advent, beginning year A. Christ the King is a fairly recent addition to the liturgical year, begun by Pope Pius XI in the mid 1920s, in the face of secularism and the rise of fascism in Europe. It is asking us the question, who or what do we put first in our lives? Do we put the state first in our lives? Money? Possessions? Power and control? Or do we put Christ first in our lives, with all that implies? Do we seek the kingdoms of this world, or the kingdom of God?

Jeremiah compares a king to a shepherd. There were some bad kings in his time, which led to the leadership of Israel being carried off into exile in Babylon. He says that the days are surely coming, when God will raise up a righteous branch for David, who shall reign as king and who will execute justice and righteousness. For Christians, that good shepherd will be Jesus, as shown in John 10.

In Colossians, Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. He rules over all the principalities and powers of this world, indeed over the whole creation. I remember visiting a Greek Orthodox church in Oakland, California, for their Easter service. It takes place in the middle of the night. When worshipers enter, it is dark, but then each person is given a candle to light. This church had a copper ceiling with the head of Christ Pantocrator painted on it, surrounded by the twelve apostles. The light from the candles made the copper dome glow, surrounding Christ with light. In this image we are reminded that Christ came to bring salvation, not only to humanity but to the whole creation. We are made in the image of God and we are called to be good stewards of that creation.

The portion of Luke which we read is set in the midst of the crucifixion, quite a contrast from the first two readings. Jesus is hanging on a cross with two thieves, one on his right and one on his left. The soldiers cast lots for his clothing and mocked him, offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” They hung an inscription over him saying, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals also mocked him and said, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” The second criminal rebuked the first, saying that they deserved their condemnation, while Jesus had done nothing wrong. Turning to Jesus, he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus replied, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

This is certainly not what we usually expect from a king. Jesus is vulnerable, submitting to the power of the Romans and the Jewish temple leaders, being mocked and made an example so that others will not follow him. He does it all out of sacrificial love for all of us, including the two criminals and all the other downtrodden people to whom he has ministered throughout his life. I think he was crucified because he was a threat to the powers that ruled at that time. He wanted justice and peace for

all those who were not receiving it in that society and culture. We need to remember that the Jews were living under Roman occupation. There was no safety net for those in need. Taxes were high and they were levied on poor peasant farmers to support a luxurious lifestyle for the upper class Romans. That is why tax collectors were so hated. Yet Jesus offered salvation for them, too. He was noted for spending time with tax collectors and sinners. An example of that is the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. He was a chief tax collector, which meant he would collect extra taxes to pad his own pocketbook. Yet, when Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for lunch, Zacchaeus found himself a changed man.

The Gospel of Luke is especially concerned for those who were suffering injustice. After the angel's annunciation of Jesus coming birth to his mother Mary, she sang the Magnificat. God looked with favor on the lowly peasant girl who was chosen to be Jesus' mother. In Luke 1:51-53, the song continues: "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." The Song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, continues this theme. It was the suggested reading in place of a psalm for today.

Jesus was not born in a palace, but in the place where the animals were kept and he was laid in a manger, not the usual circumstances for a king. For his first sermon in Luke 4, he used Isaiah 61 as a text, declaring that the Lord anointed him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. As he gave his examples of how this was to be carried out, he talked about the widow at Zarephath in Sidon, a gentile who was saved from famine by the prophet Elijah, and the healing of Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy by Elisha. The crowd became angry because Jesus was offering healing and feeding the Gentiles. As his hometown friends and neighbors, they were expecting special favors. Luke goes on to show how Jesus made friends with the hated Samaritans and the poor and hungry. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example of this. It was not the expected people, the priest and the Levite, who stopped to aid the injured man, but a Samaritan. Other parables in Luke include the one about the man who gave a great dinner. His friends and neighbors were all invited, but they made excuses not to come. He ordered his servants to go out and invite the poor, crippled, the blind and the lame. After this was done, there was still room for more. This is an image of the generosity found in God's kingdom, where there is plenty for all. (Luke 14:15-24). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus told the story of a man of wealth, in tradition called Dives, who dressed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day. The poor man Lazarus, sick and disabled, longed for the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. When they both died, Lazarus was resting in the bosom of Abraham, and the rich man was separated from them by a great chasm. Dives begged for mercy, if not for himself, then for his brothers. Father

Abraham said that they have the law that told them how to live and they had not paid attention. They would probably not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead to tell them. In Luke this story, chapter 16:19-31, is told as Jesus approaches his own death and resurrection. Jesus encounter with a rich ruler in Luke 18:18-24 shows how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God if they cannot part with their wealth to assist those in need. Again, do we store up treasures in heaven, or do we put our priorities on accumulating wealth?

As we observed at the beginning, Christ the King Sunday was established as fascism was rising in Europe in the 1920s. This was caused in part by the suffering that people had endured after World War I and the peace settlement which followed. Economic depression and mass unemployment, along with inflation and poverty. Fascism grew in Italy and Germany in particular. Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany in January, 1933. By playing on people's fears of communism and Bolshevism, which had come to power in Russia during and after the war, he persuaded Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. He abolished all political rights and democratic processes. People were detained without trial, searches did not require a warrant, property was seized, publications were censored, telephones were tapped and meetings were forbidden. All political parties were outlawed except for the Nazi party, labor unions were abolished, universities were purged, the judicial system was replaced with Hitler's "People's Courts," Jews were terrorized, and he demanded that the church be sympathetic to his movement.

Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The church was expected to exalt the idea of a racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God's will for the German people.

Some in the church resisted. Martin Niemoller and other pastors, along with theologian Karl Barth, were among the resisters. They called a meeting of representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches which took place in Gemarke Church Barmen, in the city of Wupperthal, May 29-31, 1934. They developed a document to appeal to the Evangelical churches of Germany to stand firm against the German Christian accommodation to National Socialism. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, one of the documents in the Presbyterian "Book of Confessions," resulted from this meeting. It had six propositions, each quoting from scripture, stating its implications for the present situation, and rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians. The declaration proclaims the church's freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life. The church is to obey him as God's one and only Word, who determines its order, ministry, and relation to the state. The Confessing Church arose out of this meeting and this document.

Karl Barth was among the writers of the Barmen Declaration. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was teaching in England at the time, but he returned to Germany out of a sense of duty to God and country, and he became part of the Confessing Church. He taught at the underground seminary at Finkenwalde, an old estate near the town of Stettin, close to the Baltic Sea. The estate was in disrepair but Confessing Church members raised money for repair. Students, including the Bonhoeffer biographer Eberhard Bethge, had withdrawn or been expelled from seminaries sponsored by the German Church. Many of them suffered persecution during the reign of National Socialism. Bonhoeffer taught at the seminary from 1935-1937. In spite of his pacifism, he joined the Resistance, along with some of his relatives. They developed a plot to assassinate Hitler in March, 1943. It failed, and plotters were arrested on April 5, 1944 and imprisoned in Tegel military prison. As the Allies came close to defeating Germany, he was moved to Buchenwalde concentration camp. On April 8-9, he was given a sham trial at Flossenberg prison and executed, along with several relatives.

Not only Jesus, but many others through the centuries have been martyrs for the faith. They put God's kingdom above the kings of this world and suffered for it. We are not all called to be martyrs, but we are called to consider what is happening in our own world, and how our faith shapes our reaction to it. There are similar situations today to what the Confessing Church in Germany encountered. There is a rise in white supremacy and white nationalism. There are efforts to keep the church submitting to the state. Our world is not free of the temptations to place something or someone else ahead of Christ in our lives. May our faith help us to grow in the strength to seek justice and peace in the world while we also seek the coming of the Kingdom of God. Amen.