

“What King is this?”

Sermon on Sunday, November 20, 2022

Dear church,

This is the time of year when I often find myself yelling and screaming instead of being thankful. “Not yet please!” “Don’t play Christmas music just yet! And don’t show us Santa commercials with big fat German cars.” By December 25 I will have developed a serious allergy to the man in the red mantle. I say let him get dressed by mid-December. But my yelling and screaming doesn’t help. And besides, God has a sense of humor. As I inhaled the gospel for this Sunday, would you know what happened? A Christmas song was intoned deep in my heart. Softly, it rose to my consciousness. “What child is this who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping.” See, now I was seriously ahead of our season. And I knew why. This Sunday, Christ the King, reminds me of this old English Christmas Carol written in the 19th century, based on an even older beloved tune. In the words of this carol, I want to ask, “What King is this who was crucified between two criminals? Whose last belongings were divided between soldiers like the spoils of war... Who never wore a crown except for the one made of thorns... Who never ruled over people with traditional means of power. And yet, the early Christians embraced it all and called him **Christ the King**.

It says something profound about our faith that we believe in a gentle, non-violent, benevolent king like that. I’m afraid most of the time we don’t have enough spiritual imagination to envision Christ’s kingdom in our world because we are so used to the power games that take place before our eyes. What do we call people who propel others to power? Kingmakers we call them. And sometimes people fight for “Christian” values but don’t acknowledge the paradox of Christ the King. They want to look good. They want to look powerful, but they don’t seem to get it.

It is rather heartening and inspiring that our early Christian fathers and mothers were not deterred by the bad image of the cross. They saw deeper. The cross doesn’t look pretty. It’s like that in our lives too. Sometimes things simply don’t look good; we feel down and

defeated. But this old Christian gospel encourages us to look beyond the obvious. It tells us to be patient when we experience pain and suffering, because Christ, the king of bad looks, can turn it into a life force somehow; and when we experience a loss, it must not be the dead end that it appears to be. If there is an unshakable core to the gospel that we preach, it's right here in the power of Christ's crucifixion. And yet, we often don't see Christ the King when we most need him.

Can anyone block out what is happening across the ocean, across the mountains of Europe? Armies fighting over blood-soaked territory; streets filled with corpses; people out of home and heat; orphans and crippled veterans. King Vladimir demands a massive blood toll. He possesses a bottomless tolerance for human sacrifices and his kingdom is built on human skulls. The place where they brought Christ the King and ended his life was called "Skull." And I want to say to the people in Ukraine: don't forget that Christ rose on the third day.

Yes, this king is very, very different, invisible, and yet omnipresent. Our rational mind wants to say, "If he is loving and kind, if he is so gentle, he probably has no power... If he was crucified and killed, he must be weak." Yet, everything in the gospels and in the letters of Paul teaches us that the power of God is revealed on the cross. It's a spiritual power; it's a power that can heal; it's power that makes us fully human and helps us to act like human beings. It's what the Nazis lacked; it's what every dictator lacks; it's the water of life that brings healing to the nations.

Did you notice in the story? The only person who acknowledges the power of Christ is a criminal. The soldiers mock him. The leaders deride and provoke him. They put up this sign, which says, "King of the Jews." They think it's funny. It's amazing, isn't it, what people make fun of when they think it will get laughter out of an audience and when the person who is made fun of can't even respond! Our own leadership class, the kings and queens of democracy... don't they often behave like the leaders who came to the scene of the crucifixion of our Lord, pointing their fingers at criminals, making fun of a perfectly good person to get a rise out of their constituents? Oh, it is so easy in the days of social

media to send a verbal stink bomb out that people will have a hard time defusing. But the gospels say the real power is elsewhere: the power to save lives, the power to instill faith, the power to forgive and rise above the dirt.

What did Jesus say? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." On the cross, Christ thrones above his torturers, literally but also spiritually. He has the ultimate power over life and death, over eternity. The old Christmas tune that I intoned earlier says it:

"This, this is Christ the King whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Haste, haste to bring Him laud. The babe, the son of Mary." That part of Christmas speaks to me today, even if it's a bit early. **Amen.**