

Sermon for Nov. 24, 2019, Christ the King Sunday
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Rev. 1:4-8; Luke 23:33-43
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

The Present King

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the Holy Spirit before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. . .

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

The Alpha and the Omega—Greek letters symbolizing the Beginning and the End, including everything in between and describing where our Lord reigns. As we hear these ancient words from Revelation about “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” I have a confession to make. I often struggle with Christ the King Sunday for two reasons. First, it seems to me that naming a particular Sunday in honor of Christ is unnecessary. Don’t we honor Christ every Sunday? Don’t we remember that we are called by our baptism to follow and serve him every single day? Since we label ourselves Christians, doesn’t that label imply that we know who our king is?

Or, have we gotten too familiar with our King, too wrapped up in and distracted by the current affairs of this world to consider his kingship, and forgotten to whom we belong? Even more troubling, has our King become *past tense*?

Today, Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday before the season of Advent begins, marks the end of the church year. Its intent is to help us focus on who Christ is in our lives, to honor him, and to anticipate his return which is the purpose of Advent. Yes, being Christians, it is a bit ironic that we would need a specific Sunday to remind us of these things. But perhaps being human, we’ve always needed reminders.

Consider this. Secularism is on the rise. Dictatorships are increasing around the globe. Radical religion-based governments are becoming more prevalent. Individualism is the word of the day while more and more people doubt Christ’s authority, and even his existence. I’m not referring to 2019 but to 1925, seven years after WWI, when Pope Pious the XI was alarmed by these same issues: secularism; dictatorships; radicalism; and individualism. In an effort to curb these trends, he added Christ the King Sunday to the liturgical (church) calendar, hoping that by circulating this date worldwide, Catholics

and other Christians might claim, again, separation of church and state, allegiance to Christ alone, trust in the Sovereignty of God and might recognize Christ as the spiritual King of their hearts, minds, wills, and bodies. In this way, the Pope believed, Christ's kingdom might truly come.

How well has that good intention worked? In light of such recent events as an election that continues to polarize this country, the prominence of secularism and individualism, the decline of Christianity in the United States, threats of war across the globe, and the rise of radical religious governments, perhaps we, some 94 years later, need to reflect on who or what we really give allegiance to, as well.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." If we sometimes have a problem reconciling Christ as King, if we downplay to whom we have given our pledge of loyalty, then these direct words from Revelation are meant to wake us up, you and me, because my second struggle with this particular Sunday when we call Jesus King is that Jesus did not act like a king, at least not the human kind of king with whom we are familiar, or with whom Pilate dealt, or who the Romans feared or the Jews expected. Jesus was born homeless, in a dusty stable, not in a castle or mansion. His parents were common people, not royalty. His first visitors were smelly shepherds straight from the flocks, the lowest on the social scale, not high-ranking officials. *But then perhaps that kind of kingship, which is foreign to us, is meant to remind us of something. . . that Jesus the King is willing to come down to us.*

Further, as an adult, instead of sitting on a throne and letting others do the dirty work, Jesus himself, God's own son, went out among his people, touching men with leprosy and women with hemorrhages, holding the hand of a little girl burning up with a fever, sticking his fingers in a man's ears to cure his deafness, and making mud with his spittle to cover the eyes of a blind man. His "royal court" consisted of twelve locals--fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, and a traitor--not knights in shining armor—and he sent them out, as well. *But then, perhaps that kind of kingship, which is foreign to us, is meant to remind us of something . . . to lay aside our pride and develop a servant's heart.*

In Matthew 4, Satan promised to give Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor," but Jesus replied, "Away from me!" This "king" turned down a kingdom. When Jesus returned to Nazareth to rest from his ministry, he was taunted by his own townspeople who asked, "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" They neither rolled out the royal carpet nor proudly welcomed Jesus home as a king. When Peter confessed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Holy One, the Christ, Jesus warned Peter and his disciples not to tell anyone. Most kings seek public acclaim and the limelight, not silence. And Jesus always, always, pointed to his father, to God, as the one to be praised, not himself. *But then, perhaps that kind of kingship, which is foreign to us, is meant to influence us somehow. . . to call us to imitate the humility of our King.*

Additionally, in his teachings, Jesus told his disciples that rewards were unimportant. Isn't that why one serves a king, to find advancement and recognition? Jesus stated that it made no difference who would sit on his left or right side; what mattered is how his followers treat others now. In the present. Where he is. Jesus commands those who follow him to love instead of bicker, to serve instead of being served, to sacrifice instead of being indulged, and to give glory to his father, not to him. Crucified by his enemies and turned on by his own subjects, this King's last words were "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," not a promise of revenge. *But then, perhaps that kind of kingship, which is so counter-cultural to us, is meant to transform us. . . into true subjects who mirror our King through self-sacrifice and love.*

Christ the King Sunday is challenging because it's a bit tricky to reconcile "what a friend we have in Jesus" with "the Almighty" King of kings and Lord of lords, the Alpha and the Omega. It's very easy to look at Jesus as the friend who walks with us and talks with us but who never expects anything more from us than to give him fifty minutes on Sunday morning as our due. But perhaps this particular king does expect more.

This Jesus we call King is ruler and subject. This Jesus we call King feels our pain; cries with us in our losses; sits with us as we struggle with our fears and our demons; protects and guides our children; brings light into our darkness; wills peace and healing for a broken world; constantly calls us to him; teaches us that his kingdom and reign begin with service and love; never leaves us abandoned; and who, most importantly, is not some far off deity instilling us with fear, but who is present now, today, this moment, asking only that we honor him by helping build his kingdom here, now, in the present. What is our response? Will we re-pledge our allegiance or be like the people in Luke's crowds, simply standing by and watching?

Scripture demands that past, present, and future belong to Jesus Christ. If we forget that Jesus is King, we miss the significance of what happened in history, of what changed history: the King gave his life for his subjects. He traded a cross of gold for a cross of thorns. For us.

Ministers come and go. Presidents and rulers govern for a season. But our King is always present. He is the great "I AM," not "I was." His kingdom includes all who desire his love, and his subjects practice love in return. We err, we veer from the Truth, we discard Jesus just like Pilate and the soldiers did, if we forget or fail to honor Christ as King of our lives, as our Sovereign Lord, if we give him lip service but not the service of our hearts. Christ our King is not past-tense; he is the present king.

To him who loves us (not loved us) and has freed us from our sins by his blood and (even now!) has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.