

The Last Sunday After Pentecost
Christ the King
November 24, 2024
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, Psalm 93,
Revelation 1:4b-8 John 18: 33-37

And He Shall Reign Forever and Ever

So, we've come through all this past liturgical year, from Advent, and Epiphany, through the penitential season of Lent and the joyous time of Easter, followed by the long, fertile, growing season of Pentecost. And like a thread through our entire liturgical year, is the promise of Christ's return, of Christian hope, that what begins with Emmanuel, God with us, God sharing our flesh, will continue forever in a transformed world where the love of God reigns.

So now, on this last Sunday after Pentecost, this last Sunday of ordinary time, when leaves are changing, there is a chill in the air, and the days are growing darker and shorter, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, otherwise known as Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday. I rather like Reign of Christ Sunday, because it focuses less on the pomp of kingship and more on what life in the Kingdom of God is like, and how we can be part of its inbreaking.

Anyway, a brief history of the feast is in order. Unlike many other liturgical feast days, this one has recent origins. It was added to the calendar of holy days in the Roman Catholic tradition by Pope Pius XI just 100 years ago, in 1925. It was originally observed in late October, a full month before the beginning of Advent. In 1970, Pope Paul VI moved the date to the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, or the Sunday immediately preceding the first Sunday of Advent. Anglican churches, such as our own Episcopal Church, observe it on this day as well. The Church of England, one of our sister churches in the Anglican Communion, states in their publication “All Saints to Advent” that “the feast of Christ the King falls on the Sunday before Advent when the church year that begins with the hope of the coming Messiah ends with the proclamation of his eternal sovereignty.” We’ve come full circle.

So, what kind of a King is our Lord Jesus Christ? What are the characteristics of his reign? And how are we to live in the Body of Christ to help make this reign a present reality?

Our Scripture readings for today help us reflect on just what kind of king Jesus is. Our first reading, taken from the book of Daniel, was

probably written about 164 BC, after the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. Daniel has several visions, such as the one described in today's lesson, all centered on the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom of righteousness that would never pass away. The Israelites had endured much during their time of exile away from their homeland and the Jerusalem Temple, the center of their spiritual life. They had also witnessed the desecration of this Temple by foreign powers when an altar to a god other than Yahweh was erected there. The vision of the "one like a human being coming on the clouds of heaven" is thought to be a reference to the Son of Man, which the Christian community later identified with Jesus. His reign, unlike the supposed power of other gods or the transitory rules of other kings, no matter how righteous, will never pass away. So, the kingship of Jesus will stand firm in the end.

Next we have the lesson from the book of Revelation. It is believed that that a Jewish Palestinian, probably not St. John the Evangelist, put this book into written form sometime around 86-91 AD, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This book is a combination letter, collection of oracles, and presentation of visions that

is meant to inspire faith in believers of all times and places that God's purposes are being worked out in the world, and the Kingdom of Christ will last forever. It also holds examples of apocalyptic, or end-times, literature. The term "apocalyptic" also refers to writings that are meant to reveal or unveil characteristics of the Divine. The whole book can be seen as one long revelation, broken up by oracles and visions of bowls of wrath being poured out, seals being broken, etc. It also has some of the qualities found in the letters of Paul, the epistles. Look at the opening. "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, etc. And at the end of the book, we have the closing, which is reminiscent of Paul's customary closing, The "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." We can compare that to Rev. 22:21 "the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints". Amen.

So, the reading from Revelation, rather than being predictive of future events, can be understood as a symbolic description of what was going on then, and indeed, through the ages; and an account of the

suffering and trials of our own day. The good news is that Christ is the eternal Word of God from the beginning, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is not a passing ruler, but the Eternal Sovereign in his glory, glory that came through his cross and resurrection. So, Christ is a powerful, just, and eternal king.

In today's Gospel reading from John, we encounter Jesus before Pilate's judgment seat. Pilate doesn't have the stomach for having him killed, or the courage for preventing his death, either. So, he just asks him if he is the King of the Jews. Jesus, of course, understands his motive, and turns the question back on him. Pilate is exasperated, and just asks him what he has done. But Jesus doesn't deny being a king; he just says his kingdom isn't the kind that is the subject of the accusations made or Pilate's belief about what a kingdom is. His kingdom is not of this world; it is not about political or temporal rule or conquest or power over others through force and violence. And his kingdom doesn't center on himself, but on the glory of God. The kingdom of Jesus isn't based on domination and control, but on peace, grace, hospitality, and mercy.

His is a kingdom of sacrificial love where the grace that flows through the cross transforms us into a community of brothers and sisters.

So what are some other characteristics of the reign of Christ?

Well, his reign is not centered in the world's values of power and domination, but on mutual submission to one another in love, of healing and transformation, of abundance of life. Jesus isn't a ruler with subjects but a servant king who seeks the best for the people God has created, a shepherd who will give his very lifeblood for those in his charge. The reign of Christ is not based on absolute power to be wielded, but the authority of absolute love to be shared. It brings liberty to the captives, and true freedom to us all.

How can we live as citizens of the reign of God in this world? We can start by looking at our baptismal covenant, where we vow to respect the dignity of every human being, and to work for justice and peace. The song says they will know we are Christians by our love, so we can share one another's burdens, and care for each other in the Body of Christ, and seek to extend welcome and hospitality in the world. We can really "see" the people we meet in our lives, listen to their

stories, respect and honor their humanity without judging. We can try to empower others instead of vying for power over them. And we can dare to speak truth to power, and bear witness to our faith in the Prince of Peace and God of love.

Finally, we can have faith that the reign of Christ is eternal. In a hymn from our liturgy a few weeks ago, we sang O God our Help in Ages Past. Listen again to the words of verses 4 and 6, “A thousand ages in your sight are like an evening gone., short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun. and O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be Thou our Guard while life shall last, and our eternal home. Rulers come and go, and we live but a short watch in the night. Yet God is our eternal home, and death, and fear, and sadness will be swallowed up in victory, joy and peace. The reign of Christ the King is forever. Amen.

