

## Christ the King

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, November 25, 2007..*

Christ, the King. What a subversive idea. At least it was, in the early years.

The “King of the Jews,” as the sign above his head proclaims, hangs on a cross, dying. This scene looks to all the world like a fundamental repudiation of Jesus’ kingship, if he even acknowledged it in the first place. In many places in the Gospels, Jesus orders his disciples and the people he healed not to speak of him as Messiah. Once, after he feeds a crowd of people and he notices that they are about to make him king, he runs off and hides from them. And now, in his final hour, whoever he is, whatever he is—all is ended, and ended in shame and humiliation and futility. This is not an ending for a king. Jesus hangs between two criminals—two *other* criminals, some might have said—and his crown is a crown of thorns. King, indeed.

But one criminal recognizes Jesus’ kingship. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” he says. And Jesus—with no need to keep secrets anymore—speaks from his throne. “Today you will be with me in paradise.” I wonder whether this condemned and dying criminal understood that the kingdom that Jesus owned is no run-of-the-mill kingdom of domination by the rich and powerful. It is a kingdom of servanthood for the poor and weak, where God would bring hope for the poor, heal the brokenhearted, liberate the oppressed, and give life to those condemned to die—including this poor criminal himself.

The Roman Empire in the first three centuries after Christ’s death and resurrection see Christianity as subversive and a threat to the emperor and to the empire. Refusing to pay homage to Caesar, Christians worship another, greater King. Early on, in the letter to the Colossians, the writer of that epistle glorifies Jesus as ruler of all. But this is a dangerous belief. Even though Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, early Christians—living in the world—often have to choose between doing the work of Caesar and doing the work of the King, and faithfulness to Christ the King sometimes comes with a sentence of death. Jesus did, after all, preach justice for the poor and the oppressed in an empire of oppression.

But in the fourth century, the emperor Constantine converts to Christianity, and Christianity stops being a threat to the state and becomes part of the Establishment. With official state approval, Christianity becomes respectable. And with respectability comes power. But this is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the wretched persecutions end. On the other hand, as the Church becomes an accepted part of society, it dresses itself up more respectably and begins to align itself less with the poor and more with the Establishment. Over time, the kingship of Christ becomes a kingship of majesty and glory. The Church, which sees itself as the reflection of the Kingdom of God on earth, becomes itself an institution of power and domination, wealth, and sometimes tyranny.

But there remains the reality of Jesus, his life and ministry, and his death on the cross. Jesus himself stood in opposition to the system of domination and fear that prevailed in the kingdoms of the world. The Church that followed him, when it became sanctioned by the state, continually has to struggle against the temptation to imitate the values of those very kingdoms. And sometimes, sadly, it gives in to that temptation and becomes as wealthy and powerful—and as oppressive—as any worldly ruler.

I have always seen this story of the Church as a history lesson, but what strikes me today is that this is not just a lesson from the past but a caution for today. The image of Christ the King that we follow shapes the kind of Christian life that we, as both a community and as individuals, will live. That's why it is so important for us to hear the story of Christ crucified—with a crown of thorns on his head—alongside the passage about Christ being the ruler of everything. If we understand the true nature of Christ the King, it is still a subversive belief—because like the emperor Constantine, we like to be on the winning side of life, and Christ the crucified King subverts that. We want to be represented by a royal king, crowned with glory and clothed in majesty, who will smite the enemy and choose us as the righteous ones who will reign in heaven with him. And then we can follow in his footsteps, smiting our enemies and being the righteous ones who will dominate on the earth. The story of Christianity even in this country, even in this century, shows the temptation for people in power to turn the Kingdom of God to justify policies of racial oppression, economic injustice, and war. But Christ, the King we are to follow, stands for a social order of justice, mercy, liberation from oppression, and dignity for all persons. Subversive.

But this is not just a political temptation. It is also a personal one. At one Christ the King Sunday celebration, the church procession included an acolyte who carried a jeweled crown on a cushion, and another acolyte with a crown of thorns on a cushion. At the children's sermon, the preacher talked about the crowns. One child pointed to the jeweled crown and said simply, "I'd rather have that one." Well, in a way, so would I. Who wouldn't choose being great over being vulnerable? In our careless moments, are we not like the righteous Pharisee who thanks God that he is not like the sinful tax collector, and like the righteous elder brother who resents the prodigal son? I sure would rather wear the crown of jewels than the crown of thorns. Instead, to follow my King, I am called to serve the needy, act with compassion, stand in solidarity with the poor, and welcome the marginalized. Subversive, to my own self-centeredness.

For our King, Christ the King, is mercy and love, not power and vengeance. Even at his death on the cross, he promises mercy. The King grants forgiveness, and we can be glad of that, because we are, as often as not, the criminals by his side—both of them. We come before Jesus with our sins before us, either angry with God like one criminal, or pleading with God like the other, and Jesus tells us, "You will be with me in paradise." In the Nicene Creed, we say that Jesus will "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." He *will* come again in power and great glory, but it will be the power of love and the glory of the resurrection that he offers to us.

On a lighter note: In the new Disney movie *Enchanted*, the animated fairy-tale wicked queen sends the beautiful young princess from their place of fantasy where one can live happily ever after, to a place of reality where, as she says, “there is no happily ever after.” In the movie, this reality where there is “no happily ever after” turns out to be Manhattan. But for us, the reality is that, with Christ crucified and risen, there is *always* “happily ever after” or at least “joyfully ever after,” a time and a place where true joys are to be found—with Christ our King, who promises paradise to us all.