

Bookends

This is Christ the King Sunday!

It's the last Sunday of our Church year, with next week being the first Sunday in Advent.

Advent, of course, marks the beginning of a new church year.

And Advent ends with the celebration of Christmas, the babe born to us — who is God with us.

And as we celebrate Christ the King, the question is:

What kind of king is Christ?

It's an important question because our answer determines how we understand, and live out, our faith.

I mention the coming Advent season because the gospel readings during that time are all about Christ's return in glory, and final judgment and just desserts.

And yet, the bookends around Advent — today and Christmas — paint a very different picture about the nature of God.

And about glory.

And judgment.

And just desserts.

Today, as Jesus confronts Pilate, we are faced with two competing images of what a king is like.

On the one hand, there's Pilate, in his fine home, fancy clothes, surrounded by servants.

He's the image of Caesar, Rome's king.

His power rests on military might – and the threat of death.

Isn't that how we humans usually see and understand power?

On the other hand, there's Jesus.

Arrested.

Beaten.

Bloodied.

He stands alone before our definition of power.

And in his surrender to our definition of power, he leads us to see what true power really looks like.

It looks like mercy.

It looks like compassion.

It looks like a helpless babe in the manger.

Because in that babe, just as in that bloodied, lonely man, is the fullness of God.

Why does this matter?

It matters because we live in a time where Christianity has been perverted into a kind of "me and you Jesus" nationalistic, racist, "entertain me" kind of monstrosity.

And the promoters of this monstrosity look to places like our Advent readings, like the Book of Revelation, all for the purpose of remaking God in our image – rather than stepping onto the difficult road of making ourselves look more like the image of God.

The implications are vast.

When we remake God in our image, Christianity becomes an exclusive club, with the insiders being saved and the outsiders being damned.

It's the perfect vehicle for foisting our bigotries and hatreds on "the other", all while blessing ourselves as "the good and the decent."

It's what motivates young men like Kyle Rittenhouse to shoot looters in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

It's what motivates the killers of Ahmaud Arbery, the young black man in Georgia, who was murdered for the capital crime of "jogging while black."

It's what gives us that billboard, also in Georgia, featuring a picture of former president Trump, looking stoically into the distance, along with this quote:

"Unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulders."

It's this view of Christ the King that sent missionaries to foreign lands for centuries – with the sword paving the way for the cross.

Rather than traveling to distant lands to discover the God who's already present among the people, we imposed our distorted notion of God, following in the footsteps of the Pharisees whom Jesus so roundly condemned:

"You travel over land and sea to make a single convert, and when you have succeeded you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are." Mt 23:15.

So let's look again.

Let's take that step back from what we think we know, and pay attention to what is so often overlooked, even as it stands right before our eyes.

Who is Christ the King?

He She They are that from which all things come into being and in which all things are held together.

And what about our salvation?

What must we DO to get it?

To earn it?

To deserve it?

Christ the King gives us the answer.

The answer is: Absolutely Nothing!

By his birth, life, death and resurrection, Christ has done the work for us.

Death IS defeated.

ALL THINGS (which includes all people, all faiths, all genders, all races) are reunited with God – the separation that sin created is gone, forever and for all.

The good news we are called to bring to the world is not “join the Jesus club and be saved” but rather – that in Christ, all is accomplished, so join in the new life of compassion, gentleness, forgiveness and mercy.

Because now, that life is possible.

And in that life is the peace that passes all understanding.

That life is revealed to different cultures, countries and cousins in words and in ways each has ears to hear.

But at bottom, it's the same life.

And as the great doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas says:

“Every truth, without exception – and whoever may utter it – is from the Holy Spirit.”

Aquinas “is saying that the truths from all the religious traditions of the world are ‘from the Holy Spirit’ and therefore are to be taken in and listened to and meditated upon.” Fox, *The Tao of Thomas Aquinas*, 65.

What does the doorway to this life look like?

It's the doorway that says at its entry:

Embrace your pain.

Face your fears.

Focus on the needs of others.

Through the paradox of surrender and service, we find new life.

As the mystic observed:

If you want to become whole,
Let yourself be partial.
If you want to become straight,
Let yourself be crooked.
If you want to become full,
Let yourself be empty.
-Tao Te Ching

These are universal truths.

Rooted in the divine.

Rooted in the holy.

"Truth always and everywhere shines a light into the world's dark and ugly corners.

A light that brings judgment, but also mercy — to those places, and hearts, where it is so desperately needed.

Empires can't cope with truth.

The powers and principalities of this world can't cope with truth.

And so they call abject lies: 'truth.'

They create 'alternate facts,' which are conceived in violence, that give birth to injustice." N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus*, 144-5, paraphrased.

The truth of Christ rejects all of this.

The truth of Christ teaches us that if we wish real power, if we wish real insight, then the mirage of violence and power must be pierced.

With Christ, we come to discover that God meets us not with coercion, money or fame.

In Christ, we come to see that God meets us quietly.

Through gentleness.

In the very midst of uncertainty.

In the very midst of our pain.

It's in gentleness and understanding that God comes under your roof, and mine.

Fr Rohr speaks of this reality as a Divine Mirror:

A mirror, the sun, and God are all the same.
They're all there, shining forth.

Their very nature is light, love, and infinite giving.
You can't offend them or make them stop shining.
You can only choose to stop receiving.
To stop enjoying.
As soon as you look, you'll see they are there.
And their message is life-giving.
In this whole wide world,
There are only lookers, and those who won't.
Those who wish to receive, and those who don't.
-Rohr, The Universal Christ, 226, modified.

Christ invites us to become a community of people who are reconciled with one another; who live with an abiding trust in this God who gives his life for us.

Who promises to rescue us from the grave.

It's been said:

"A person can choose only within the world she can see."

Christ the King invites us to see God's world.

To take the time to look around this strange place.

Where letting go becomes the path to freedom.

Where forgiveness dissolves hate.

Where death suddenly becomes the doorway to new life.

Pilate simply laughs at the world Jesus is creating.

Is it just a fools dream?

We stand at a fork in the road.

Shall we choose Pilate's way of power and might?

Or the bewildering, yet life-giving way, of Christ the King?

+amen.