

Sermon for Sunday, November 23, 2008

Last Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 29)

By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson	Ezekiel 34:11-16
Psalm	Psalm 100
Second Lesson	Ephesians 1:15-23
Gospel	Matthew 25:31-46

Today—this Last Sunday after Pentecost—is also known as “Christ the King” Sunday. Obviously, today’s feast proclaims Christ as our King—but how can he be king for us in a country that knows no king, no queen, no royalty to speak of? In a nation founded in a revolutionary war against a distant monarch? How can Christ be king for us when we have no reference points, no way of understanding exactly what that means?

How can Christ reign for us, be king for us?

Some would suggest that we simply translate the meaning of monarchy into the language of our modern world, and there we can find a way to worship a king. But, if we do so, Christ only becomes for us the absolute power who demands our begrudging obedience, the judge before whom there is no appeal, the political leader whose term of office limits the good to be accomplished, the schemes to be hidden.

It seems as if Camelot nor Congress will do for us.

The biblical word, however, offers us a different glimpse of majesty and power, a word and vision so out of character and so out of touch with modern notions of “leadership” and “charisma” that it demands a hearing. “The lost I will seek out,” Christ has told us, “the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal.” Against all of our images of stern authority and capricious power, we hear Christ’s voice among the ruins, beckoning us to come closer, the voice of a simple shepherd who calls to his flock and who tends to the scattered ones. We hear the voice of the One who judges us, not by our strengths nor by our cleverness, but by our depth of need.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall now want.”

What kind of a king is this?

In Jesus, the image of the shepherd-king is turned upside down in that mysterious wisdom of God. As we know, the shepherd is the One who comes to the very lamb who's led to slaughter, who's led to the cross, who, by entering into death, embraces all of our deaths in a single moment, even before they've claimed us. We soon see that this One, this Jesus, is like no other king that has ever reigned. For the feast, for this Sunday of Christ the King, our holy meal proclaims a king where we least expect him: in our yearning for life, in our suffering, and in our need.

This is no ordinary king.

If, then, we look for Christ's reign in the world, we need only to hear his words: "I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; you gave me clothing, comfort, and friendship."

If we look for Christ the King today, if we seek to worship this shepherd, we won't discover him clothed in the garments of unbridled power which demand our attention and our respect. Instead, we'll discover him within and without—exactly at that place where he robes himself with our human frailty, in our flesh, in the rhythms of conflict and peace, of pain and pleasure which moves through human life.

Here is our struggle, then—to be witnesses to his life and his love for us. This is where he reigns. And here in this world, hidden in the open hand begging for a taste of bread and a cup of water, in the struggle for justice and peace, in the lives of women and men who abandon the strategies of fear and intimidation for the politics of hope and mercy: here Christ reigns.

And, yes, at last, he reigns among us in our meal of thanksgiving. The judge of the universe, glorified by the highest of heavens, comes to us as a derelict on the cross, the lamb of sacrifice, the wounded king. To those who thirst for justice, he offers his royal body and blood, so that we may consume it, taking Christ into ourselves. The blood is poured out, the body of the king is broken that we might feast not only on his mercy, but on his love—that we might taste it with our lips. We are given the remnants of a king who has chosen for us the way of life, a way the remains with us always.

God grant that we, in a world which yearns for the kingdom of the just, we might become that very mercy which we eat and drink.

One can only hope.

Amen. ...

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