

Feast of Christ the King, Year A, 112011  
All Saints Episcopal Church

*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the one of the least of these who are members of my family,  
you did it to me.*

Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, which happens to be the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Next week, Advent begins again, and we will enter Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary.

I think it is interesting to know a little bit about how this feast came into being. In 1925, Pope Pius XI, wrote an encyclical instituting this feast day. Pius connected the denial of Christ as king to the rise of secularism around the world, particularly in Europe. The day of this observance, initially, was the last Sunday in October, a week before All Saints' Sunday. However, in 1969, Pope Paul VI moved the date of the feast from October to the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, or the last Sunday after Pentecost - the Sunday before Advent. It seems fitting that the feast celebrating Christ's kingship is observed right before Advent, when we liturgically wait for the promised Messiah (King) - where for every ending there is a new beginning and for every beginning there is an ending.

There are some issues for us to face a century after this feast began. First of all is the reality that the originally subversive nature of Christianity gradually became the status quo in the Holy Roman Empire, making it a part of the power structure of the Emperor and changing the face of Christianity ever since. By the time the Protestant Reformation rolled around, it seemed perfectly normal that the countries of Europe were aligned according to the religious faith of their heads of state.

Another issue is that the church has not always behaved as it has been called to do by this king we celebrate today; far too often, the church has participated in the political games that create winners and losers, groups with power and groups without it. So as Christians, we are called to be aware of our own past and reject the church's interest in worldly power.

And, of course, we know that the world is a different place than it was in 1925, and there are hardly any kings around who are anything more than figureheads.

So what does it mean when we say Christ is King, especially when our self-understanding in this country is that we are independent from the idea of monarchy? What is it that we are celebrating?

Well, it's easy to see that more issues are raised by just looking around at the state of our world: if Christ is King, why is there so much violence and unrest in the world? If Christ is King, why are there children dying of malnutrition in refugee camps? If Christ is King, what are we to make of the world's current crop of dictators and tyrants? If Christ is King, why are we humans continuing to make choices that endanger and even kill off other species who share with us "this fragile earth, our island home"?

Either Christ is not a king, or he's a king who doesn't care; OR there's a reality that we can't see that is hidden behind the everyday reality of these questions. Which brings us to today's Gospel.

The reaction of those who meet the one seated on the throne suggests this hidden reality: they are surprised, and ask, "When was it, Lord, that we saw you hungry and did not feed you?"

Matthew's gospel points over and over to the kingdom of God as a hidden reality - hidden by the world of human enterprise - a reality that shows itself occasionally when Jesus is doing what Jesus does: healing people, feeding people, meeting and loving people on the margins. In this gospel, Jesus says to his followers over and over that the kingdom of God is real now and available now to them - to us - when we behave like citizens of that kingdom: when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the sick, serve the least of us, and, maybe, above all, when we, like Jesus, speak God's truth to the powers that be.

There is also a sense that, in the reality of the kingdom, those who see it and understand it are from the margins of society, not from the powerful and content center of it. Matthew's cast of characters who see and accept what Jesus has to offer include a Roman centurion, a Canaanite woman, disciples from out in the country. All of them listen to Jesus and follow him. Matthew doesn't tell us about anyone from the social register being part of the group following him.

Although the world has changed constantly since the Gospel of Matthew was

written, the list of the vulnerable in today's reading seems to have remained the same, changing only in how many fit in the categories. "The hungry" now means a billion people who go to bed every night with little or no food. "The thirsty," means millions of people worldwide dealing with severe drought. "The sick," includes millions of people infected with the most difficult and pernicious illnesses, including AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. And the United States leads the world in its share of "those in prison." It is harder than ever to see the reality of God's kingdom and the Kingship of Christ behind these devastating everyday realities. But it is easier than ever to see those on the margins whose needs are overwhelming.

And the call of Jesus to his disciples has not changed. As followers of Jesus, we are called to behave as citizens of the kingdom, for love of the King.

Yet the notion of the kingship of Christ, over against the reality in which we live, begs the question: are we behaving like citizens of the kingdom? Are the hungry and thirsty, the poor and neglected better off because of us? Is the reality of the lavish, all-encompassing love of God visible in what we do? In the end, this gospel says, that's what matters in human existence. When we make choices about where to spend our time, our money, our energy, and our best gifts, we are making choices that build the kingdom - or don't.

There's a quote by Barbara Harris, the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion, that I love. I keep it on a scrap of paper in front of me on my desk. It seems a fitting way to close: "When there are no more least or lost or left out, then we will have finished that which we have been called to do."

Your kingdom come, O God. Amen.

(paraphrased in part from sermon by the Rev. Kay Sylvester, *Worship that Works*)