

Sermon for the Feast of Christ the King 2010

While many protestant denominations celebrate the Feast of Christ the King on this Sunday, some might be surprised to learn that it was begun by the twentieth century Pope Pius XI in 1925. Europe at that time was experiencing great economic turbulence following World War I. People everywhere were looking for someone to rescue them from the hardships they faced daily. As we know, for many Germans the person who appeared to be a savior would, in just a few years, rule Germany with an iron hand and seek to rule the world.

Pius XI, hoping to strengthen the Church by giving private piety a public face, called for a day on which people would gather to bend their knees to Christ and confess him as Lord. No earthly ruler is lord, he would confess, and Jesus is to be king not only in our hearts but also in our lives.

As the German nation looked for a political savior in the 1920's, so Jesus contemporaries looked for God to raise up a king like David. This king would rule over a glorious new kingdom. Was Jesus to be a messiah of a rather harmless kind, more concerned with the inner world? Was his execution a terrible mistake? While it was clearly not a military revolution that Jesus sought, there were elements of potential subversion in the movement. He announces good news to the poor and expresses the worth of the worthless in society.

Jesus was definitely not starting a school for personal enrichment and meditation, nor was he promising a utopia. Rather he was announcing a change already embodied in himself and his followers. Dangerous, we might say? Certainly those with a vested interest in preserving the status quo thought so. Jesus called for a revolution of love that entailed identifying and embodying a new kind of power.

The feast of Christ the King is reminds us of the conflict about what it means to be Christ the King. "The King" is obviously a gendered expression, and the dominant model of

monarchy has been a male one. Asserting Christ the king as an image of ethereal splendor with all the trappings of royalty reinforces the standard images of greatness as power and domination. Asserting Christ the king as a counter image, of a life poured out in compassion in the midst of the cruelty and corruption that keeps the poor, poor, is a subversive declaration.

Jude Siciliano reminds us that we are a people who admire power. We boast of being the most powerful nation in the world, and we have political, economic, and military power beyond any known in history. Yet today we celebrate one who is identified with the suffering servant in Isaiah. *“Those who accept the rule of this king are invited to put aside worldly thoughts of power and dominance and commit themselves to Jesus’ rule, which calls them to live guided by the law of love: to forgive enemies, empower the disenfranchised, and welcome the stranger...”*

“This feast challenges us to reflect on the power each of us has and how we use it....There are many ways we have and use power; many ways we have influence over individuals and as members of communities and organizations....Will we remember that he was God’s servant who ruled, not from a worldly throne, but from the cross?”

On Tuesday, we remember Clement, Bishop of Rome in the calendar of saints. Clement served the Church around 100 AD. He wrote a letter to the Church in Corinth that Paul founded calling for unity. It is the kind of unity that our Presiding Bishop Katherine as well as our Bishop longs for among those estranged from our diocese and Communion.. In anticipation of the beginning of a new church year next Sunday let us remember all who are estranged from our community of faith as well as Jesse, who has makes a public vow to follow Christ as a Daughter of the King. I would like to close with a translation of a portion of Clement’s letter to the Church in Corinth. Here Clement appeals to God’s people to practice hospitality and humility, giving rather than receiving as the body of Christ in the world.

Because of our recent series of unexpected misfortunes and set-backs, my dear friends, we feel there has been some delay in turning our attention to the causes of dispute in your community. We refer particularly to the odious and unholy breach of unity among you, which is quite incompatible with God's chosen people, and which a few hot-headed and unruly individuals have inflamed to such a pitch that your venerable and illustrious name, so richly deserving of everyone's affection, has been brought into serious disrepute.

There was a time when nobody could spend even a short while among you without noticing the excellence and constancy of your faith. Who ever failed to be impressed by your sober and selfless Christian piety, to tell of your generous spirit of hospitality, or to pay tribute to the wide range and soundness of your knowledge? It was your habit at all times to act without fear or favor, living by the laws of God and deferring with correctness to those who were set over you.

Humility, too, and a complete absence of self-assertion were common to you all; you preferred to offer submission rather than extort it, and giving was dearer to your hearts than receiving. Asking no more than what Christ had provided for your journey through life, you paid careful heed to His words, treasured them in your hearts, and kept His sufferings constantly before your eyes. The reward was a deep and shining peace, a quenchless ardor for well-doing, and a rich outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon you all.

From the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth (Penguin Books, 1968).