

## Christ the King

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, November 25, 2018  
The Feast of Christ the King (Year B) (Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)

*Revelation 1:4b-8 Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

*John 18:33-37 Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

Today is the Feast of Christ the King. On this feast day, we honor Jesus Christ as our king. Being Americans, we're trained from an early age to be opposed to kings. We like our independence, and we have no sense for the value or virtue of kings.

This past October 26, I noticed that the church marks that day as the lesser Feast of St. Alfred. I wondered who Alfred was, so I read up on this saint. Alfred was king in the west of England, before England was England. He reigned from the year 871 to 899. Alfred was known as a just ruler who helped unify the people and the local lords, pressing for common education and security in the land. Now this sounds like a standard stump speech for any politician, but security was no easy matter.

For over 100 years, Vikings would sail to England to sack and burn the villages and return home with the plunder. These raids were so frequent and so widespread that it was kind of like the typical Viking job: "Honey, I'm off to sack an English village again! Just another day at the office..." For the English, it was no laughing matter. Can you imagine living life constantly devastated by these raids? There was no peace, no stability or safety, no freedom from this brutality. But in Alfred's time, he unified the country, raised a standing army, taxed the local lords to support it, and organized the resistance until he defeated the Vikings and held them at bay.

That may be a helpful image for us when we think of kingship. For Alfred's English, they may have balked at their taxes and the draft of men for the standing army, but they needed Alfred as king to save them from the violence of their enemies year after year, decade after decade. When Alfred asked for allegiance from the English, it was willingly given, for in submitting to Alfred, they would be free.

Of course, these are Alfred's good qualities on display, and these are the good things that Kings can do. But most kings have a way of falling into corruption, abuse of power and corruption of

justice. In Jesus' time, Caesar was the great king and emperor. The Roman Emperors were godless men who held power by conquest, corruption and murder. King Herod was the Jewish puppet king in Judea, under Caesar's rule. But Herod used his power for himself more than for his people. Pilate and other Roman governors had power to kill if it suited them, valuing expediency over justice. Pilate makes this clear when he challenges Jesus to answer him, saying "do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?"

No, these are human kings, and we rightly resist this kind of corruption of kingship. When we say that Jesus is King, we are clear that he is a different kind of king.

However, there is another kind of corruption in our relationship with kings. We resist corrupt kings, but in response, we often want to make ourselves kings. We say that "the customer is King" and since we're all customers, we all see ourselves as king. There seems no higher value in western culture than autonomy: literally the word means "the law of the self." We want to put ourselves on the thrones of our own lives and worship our own desires. Instead of Herod or Pilate or Caesar getting what they want, we want to get whatever we want. In that way, we truly want to worship ourselves and no one else.

In fact, I think that we are secretly comfortable seeing Christ the King in shackles before Pilate, or dying on the cross. We like our kings weak and seemingly inconsequential to us. Even in relationship to God, we resist pictures of God as powerful and as a king of justice. We'll take the Jesus that is for us and good to us, but we're not used to the idea of submitting to anyone, even God. Even if we could accept a king like Alfred, we would do so as a transaction to get something we want. But that's not submission, that's a treaty, one that we might resent.

Submission is not something we like to think about or practice. Given the corruption of human authority, submission immediately sounds like injustice. But submission to God is, as the prayer book calls it "perfect freedom." Submission to God is, in part obedience to God. We obey God, we follow God's commandments, but submission is more than that. Submission involves trusting God's commandments because we trust God. Submission is a desire to follow God, whether we understand God's direction or not. If Jesus were like Herod or Pilate or Caesar, that would be hard to do. If Jesus were like Alfred, part of us would still hold back our trust. But Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

So when I think of Christ the King, I have to ask myself "where do I hold back from trusting Jesus as king?" Let me share the question with you: where do you hold back from trusting Jesus as King? Do you think of your own advantage when you vote, or do you consider the needs of others as God sees them? Do you evaluate God's commandments based on what is popular, or do you trust God's commands and shape your desires to follow him? Do you think of your competitors as enemies, or as peers, as God sees them?

Do you think of your family in terms of what they give you, or in terms of what you all need together, as God does? If you are married, do you evaluate your marriage by how it serves your goals, or do you change your goals to serve your marriage and God who joins you together? Do you think of those hostile to you as disposable, or as broken souls in need of God's mercy, as God sees them? Does your generosity come from what is left over after serving yourself, or is generosity your first step in serving God, as God was generous to you? Do you treat God as a convenient metaphor when you have time for him, or as the king who loves you?

These are the kinds of questions I ask myself to challenge my own inclination to put myself on the throne. If Jesus were simply a means to a benefit, like Alfred was for the security of England, then my relationship with him would be a sort of deal, a sort of treaty. But our relationship with Jesus is not a treaty, but a covenant. Jesus does not want to make us subjects. Indeed, we're already subjects of Jesus—us, Pilate, Herod, Caesar—we are all subject to the rule of Christ the King. Pilate did not take anything from Jesus that Jesus did not freely give. No, we are more than subjects of Jesus. We are heirs—joint heirs with Christ—sons and daughters of the King, inheritors of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

For Jesus, the power of Rome was inconsequential. As he tells Pilate, his kingdom is not of this world. We are reading this from the Gospel according to John, of course, so all this language about the world is special language. John spends a lot of time contrasting Jesus and the world. “The world” in John is corrupt and decaying, trapped in darkness, blind to the truth, blind to God, blind and hostile to Jesus and God the Father.

But remember, in John we also hear Jesus say “for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world, but Jesus loves the world. He does not love the world’s darkness and sin and hostility against him. But he so loves the world that he is willing to die to redeem the world, to bring light to its darkness, healing to its brokenness, reconciliation to its hostility and life to its culture of death.

Tim Keller, the well-known New York pastor and author, writes about Christ the King. He writes that the Gospel is not good advice. The Gospel is not a self-help proposition saying “you should do this to improve your life.” The Gospel is rather a summons to follow a king. The Gospel is not a sales pitch but rather an announcement. The Gospel is a proclamation that something has happened that changes everything, changes our priorities, changes our understanding of what is true and what is important.

A world where each person is a self-serving king is a world disconnected and isolated by mistrust, a world stuck in despair, a world not unlike our world. But that is not what Jesus wants for this world. When we follow Jesus as King, we shine light on a different world, a different kingdom in which we can live today. A kingdom of trust and love and healing and reconciliation and life. A kingdom of perfect freedom.

Jesus is a different kind of king. Jesus is a king we can trust, a king who makes a covenant with us by giving himself to us to save us from our sins, and then invites us to share new life with him—life that will never end.

With God breaking into this world in Jesus, we can live seeing the truth of the world through God’s eyes. To live with Christ as King is to live with the desire to follow Jesus, to know true freedom in him, to find the life that is truly life, and to share that life with others. The Feast of Christ the King is a celebration that the true king has come into the world and called us as his own—not as subjects, but as heirs—sons and daughters of the King.