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November 23, 2025
Christ the King Sunday
Luke 23: 33-43

Happy New Year's Eve this Christ the King Sunday! In case you forgot, next Sunday we begin a new liturgical year.

Here's a little information about Christ the King Sunday. It was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. It was set it to be observed on the last Sunday of October each year. In 1970, Pope Paul V moved it to the last Sunday before Advent. Mid-century protestant churches began recognizing the feast. At some point between the 1928 and the 1979 Prayer Books this was also adopted by the Episcopal Church.

We end this liturgical year fraught with discussion about kings – an unusual topic in the United States, mainly because 250 years ago we revolted against King George III of England. Earlier this week I was startled to learn that the Michigan House of Representatives passed a resolution to officially declare November 23 as “Christ the King Sunday.”

*Republican state Rep. Josh Schriver, who sponsored the resolution, declared in his brief remarks in the House chamber that Christ the King Sunday is a time “to remember that moral truth stands above political power.” He added that the day should remind people that “freedom depends on something deeper than government. It depends on the conscious virtue of its citizens and our bedrock of faith.” Schriver therefore insisted our public life and the lawmakers in the chamber need “a unity like no other in him.”*¹

Surprisingly it turns out that the encyclical, Quas Primas (Which First), written by Pius XI had its own Christian Nationalism slant. The encyclical is lengthy; this is one argument (paragraph 24) for establishing the feast day.

If We ordain that the whole Catholic world shall revere Christ as King, We shall minister to the need of the present day, and at the same time provide an excellent remedy for the plague which now infects society. We refer to the plague of anti-clericalism, its errors and impious activities. This evil spirit, as you are well aware, Venerable Brethren, has not come into being in one day; it has long lurked beneath the surface. The empire of Christ over all nations was rejected. The right which the Church has from Christ himself, to teach mankind, to make laws, to govern peoples in all that pertains to their eternal salvation, that right was denied. Then gradually the religion of Christ came to be likened to false religions and to be placed ignominiously on the same level with them. It was then put under the power of the state and tolerated more or less at the whim of princes and rulers.

¹ <https://publicwitness.wordandway.org/p/christ-the-christian-nationalist>; Brian Kaylor

*Some men went even further, and wished to set up in the place of God's religion a natural religion consisting in some instinctive affection of the heart. There were even some nations who thought they could dispense with God, and that their religion should consist in impiety and the neglect of God. The rebellion of individuals and states against the authority of Christ has produced deplorable consequences.*²

*Aside from the encyclical, the papacy was in a difficult transition time politically. A few years after his encyclical on Christ the King, Pius negotiated a treaty with Benito Mussolini's Italian government that ended decades of disputes after Italy had seized papal territories. The treaty recognized Vatican City as an independent nation, thus making Pius the first pope to serve as a head of state since the fall of the Papal States in 1870. While Pius privately worried about Mussolini's megalomania and embrace of Adolf Hitler, publicly he remained aligned with Mussolini's Fascist regime and shared Mussolini's vision of an anti-democratic, authoritarian state.*³

This story shows that good things can come to be from the wrong reason. In addition to many other references in the Scriptures to the Kingdom of God today's scriptures acknowledge the kingship of Jesus Christ. Jeremiah as we just heard says, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord. When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." And one of my favorites, all of Psalm 46 that begins with "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

Christ the King is not an earthly King and continues to work in the world today. So, what about Kings today?

Mostly what I know about kings is negative – Herod, Ceasar, Augustus Ceasar, Tiberius, Putin, Hitler. Jesus never had a position like these men, but throughout the gospels there are numerous references to the kingdom of God and many believed Jesus was the Messiah, so the appellation of king is reasonable. The Good Friday Gospel recounts the contentious interrogation of Jesus about who he was and where he came from; all of which ended with Pilate, fearful of God, continually attempting to find an reason to release Jesus, but in the end when he asked the crowd one more time, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor."

Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

The gospel says that the inscription "King of the Jews" was nailed to the cross and soldiers taunted Jesus with the title while he was dying. Yet, Jesus was not an earthly King.

² https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html

³ 'Pope And Mussolini' Tells The 'Secret History' Of Fascism And The Church; APRIL 24, 2015 1:58 PM ET; HEARD ON FRESH AIR

From the cross Jesus asked God to forgive the crowd for what they had done; assured the thief who repented that he would be with him in Paradise that day; and put his mother in a disciple's care. The night before, on Maundy Thursday, he commanded his disciples to love one another as he loved them.

As Jesus had done throughout his ministry, he turned things upside down. Kings during his time demanded and required allegiance from their subjects; Jesus taught his flock, ate with them, healed them, forgave them, loved them ALL. Jesus was not a despot. Jesus was a servant-leader.

The United States is founded on the premise of self-determination and the rule of law. The Constitution specifically requires the separation of church and state. It also set up a three-part governance structure so that there would be a balance of power rather than concentrate power in one person. Heather Cox Richardson, an esteemed American historian, says that this arose because of the diversity in the people who were rebelling. As she puts it, they agreed on the big and important things and left other details to be worked out as needed.

On this Christ the King Sunday we are invited follow Jesus. The simplest way is to love God above all and love our neighbors as ourselves. I remind you of the warning that Jesus told the crowd at the temple in last week's gospel: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

If you are discerning, ask yourself is the person a servant leader or someone who is looking out for themselves?

While we will struggle in coming months and years with questions about kingship now, I want to leave you with a poem that honors our King and offers us strength for the journey:

King⁴

*There was also an inscription over him,
“This is the King of the Jews.”
—Luke 23.38*

Oh, they got no end of mirth out of that,
so ripe for mockery, so unlike the king
they secretly wanted, the conqueror,
the one who would mount the power structures
and give them a better place in it.
But here is this weak, weaponless man
who reminds them of what hurts most in them;
who suffers what they are most afraid of,
only without shrinking;
who takes power structures
in his shattered hands and shatters them,
wielding the overwhelming power of mercy
from within their own wounds;
whose love is immense, indomitable, immortal.

The one anxious to be king
climbs over others, even himself,
mocking the one in the lowest place,
closest to the great power.

This one reigns in weakness and suffering.
There is no king
and he is the one,
come not to rule
but to redeem.

⁴ Steve Garnass-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, www.unfoldinglight.net