

November 24, 2024
Harvest Sunday: Christ the King
Christ Church Exeter

Growing Up to Become King

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." John 18:33-37

Pilate asked Jesus: "So you are a king?" Today is a day where we consider how the image of Christ as King shapes the way we understand who Jesus was and is and what kind of kingdom proclaimed again and again.

If I were honest, I've long struggled with this Sunday. I know it falls on the last Sunday before the Advent season begins. 'King' is not my first go-to image or language that comes to mind for me when I think of Jesus or pray to him. Good Shepherd, yes. Servant, yes. Healer, Light of the World, True vine, Savior... yes. So how can I and perhaps all of us reclaim the power of meaning of Christ as King?

There are only a handful of people born today who would have grown up expecting to be king one day. We can only imagine how unique and challenging their childhoods could be: to grow up knowing that you were expected to rule. We can follow the lives of the Windsor clan in the U.K. to see that the burden and privilage of royalty is real.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Do adults still ask children that question? I remember getting asked it all the time when I was young. I didn't have the wits about me to respond: "I just want to be a kid: don't stress me out with a 20-year plan." Do you remember how you answered? I can only speak for boys of a certain generation who seemed prompted and likely to respond: policeman, fireman, or football player. Imagine being able to be anyone you would want to be.

I remember the story the late Bishop Barbara Harris of the Diocese of Massachusetts used to tell. She was the first woman consecrated bishop. One Sunday morning she was waiting to enter a church for a confirmation service and a family pulled into the parking lot and were running late. A young boy with big eyes saw Bishop Harris all decked out in her cope

and miter vestments, looked up at his mother and said: “mom, can boys grow up to be bishops too?” That is the gift of the Episcopal Church.

As Christians who come to church and listen to the readings and sermons, we spend a lot of time focusing on the life of Christ -- as we should. We tell the story of his birth in Bethlehem, follow him to Nazareth, and then a big gap of years is largely lost to history and Scripture. We pick up with him again for his three years of ministry gathering disciples, and then we dedicate a lot of time to the end of earthly life. His journey to Jerusalem, his betrayal, his trial, his crucifixion, his death and Resurrection.

Jesus confronted challenges and faced choices in his life. The devil gave him options out in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. He could have turned rocks into bread, become like a bird by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple, or he could have ruled over all the nations of the world. He said no and added: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Matthew 4:7.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a simple donkey and not a powerful horse fit for a worldly king. He could have rallied his followers to take up arms against the Roman occupiers: he chose a path of peace. Religious authorities challenged him at every turn for upsetting their status and way of life. “Love your enemy. Turn the other cheek. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Love one another.” His way would be different. And as his followers, we are called to take on this way of seeing our world.

At the pivotal moment when he stood in front of Pilate in today’s gospel, when asked whether or not he was the Kings of the Jews, Jesus took a step back and asked a question of his own: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

Here’s when I turn to the Message translation: Pilate said, “Your people and your high priests turned you over to me. What did you do?” “My kingdom,” said Jesus, “doesn’t consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn’t be handed over. But I’m not that kind of king, not the world’s kind of king.” Then Pilate said, “So, are you a king or not?”

If asked as young boy in Nazareth: “what do you want to be when you grow up?” – the young Jesus in likelihood would have said: a carpenter like Joseph. Only God knows fully when and how Jesus knew that his life would be different. It’s that fully human/fully divine part of his identity that is at the heart of the Christian faith yet so hard to wrap our minds around.

In the end, we know that Jesus never had coronation or throne -- what he experienced was a brutal crucifixion as his mother and friends looked on. He never ruled over a nation. His crown would be one made of thorns. He chose to lead by emptying himself and serving, embracing rather than rejecting, forgiving instead of judging.

This unlikely king showed us another way to be and live. And it is not always an easy path.

Our work each day, each week, is to live in the world, but not to become shaped by its values and priorities. To tune out the noise so we can find the silence. To be open to be changed and moved and shaped by what is eternal and lasting.

Today we are also channeling the spirit of Thanksgiving with turkey day fast approaching. Yesterday, as we do each year, our parishioners gathered and sent out 30 baskets of food to provide a lift for families in our town who would not share in what many of us take for granted. Yes, even in leafy Exeter New Hampshire.

We are also rounding the corner on our stewardship season. I did wonder if to some ears, our theme this year might have come across as tone-deaf to the moment at hand. Together for Joy. Are we failing to 'read the room' so to speak with all of this talk of joy in such challenging times?

I would like to believe that as believers in Christ, part of our DNA is to be, in the words of C.S. Lewis, "surprised by joy" at all times in our lives. To see light in the darkness.

It is precisely the right time to lift up this message.

We need one another.

We need to gather more.

We need to listen harder and talk less.

We need to sing more and argue less.

We need more praise and less judgement.

We need to be more thankful and less regretful.

We need the spirit of generosity to do what we never thought was possible.

We need to give more than God needs to receive.

Now is the moment to give thanks for all that God has done and continues to do for us and for the world in which we live.