

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 24, 2024 – The Last Sunday after Pentecost – Christ the King
Revelation 1:4b-8 and John 18:33-37
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In our liturgical calendar, today is the last Sunday of the church year. Every year on the last Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday before Advent begins, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. Our lessons this morning from the Book of Revelation and from John's Gospel are concerned with the kingship of Christ. What kind of king is Jesus Christ?

The passage we heard from the Book of Revelation is the greeting of the author of the book, John of Patmos, to the Christians who will read and hear it. First, a word about the author. This John is not the author of the Gospel of John. No one knows who he was, except that he was a Christian in Asia Minor – now Turkey – who fell afoul of the Roman government and was exiled to Patmos, an island off the coast of Turkey. He had visions which are recorded in the last book of our Bibles, the book called Revelation.

In this extended greeting, John speaks of Jesus Christ in these terms: “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Jesus was a “faithful witness,” which means that he was a martyr. He is “the firstborn of the dead,” which means that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the first of a general resurrection of the dead in the future. He is “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” that is, superior to all earthly powers.

John of Patmos praises Jesus in these words: “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood ... to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” This is a very important statement of the nature of Christ the king. He is worthy of glory and dominion forever because, for love of us, he gave his life in a final sacrifice of self-giving love. Christ is the king of love who poured out his life for the good of others – in his ministry and finally, on the cross. He used the gifts and power God gave him to lead people to God and relieve human suffering.

John goes on: [Jesus] “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.” Jesus is the king of self-giving love, and we are to be like him, citizens of a kingdom of love. We are all to be “priests” – that is, those who offer sacrifice to God – and in this way we will serve God the Father, as Jesus did. In this short passage from the Book of Revelation we have a theological vision of Christ the King of love who, by his sacrifice, has freed us and made it possible for us to follow him by living lives of self-giving love, offered to God.

You may have been somewhat startled to hear this morning's lesson from the Gospel of John, a portion of the account of Jesus' trial before Pilate prior to the crucifixion. Of course, the passage has to do with Christ's kingship. Remember that in Jesus' time the Jews were under Roman rule. Pilate owed his loyalty to Rome. From his point of view, anyone who claimed kingship without Roman permission would have been regarded as a threat, a potential or actual insurrectionist. So, Pilate questions Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He wants to know if Jesus is a political threat he needs to deal with.

To this Jesus replies, “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.” As he has done several times during the course of his ministry, Jesus differentiates between the kingdom of God – his kingdom – and the kingdoms of the world. The kingdoms of the world use the power of aggression, but Jesus' kingdom does

not. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and Peter cut off a soldier's ear, Jesus rebuked Peter and healed the soldier. Jesus would not allow his followers to use aggression to protect him. He did not use the power he might have used – ten legions of angels – to save himself from death.

Pilate replies with another question, another attempt to find out if Jesus is a threat to Roman rule, "So you are a king?" Jesus does not claim to be a king – "You say that I am a king." But what he does claim is this: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Jesus explains that the purpose of his birth, his life and his death is to be a witness to the truth about God. Elsewhere in John's Gospel we read that Jesus taught his disciples that those who had seen him had seen the Father. In the self-giving love of Jesus we see the very nature of God.

At the end of our church year we worship Christ the King. What kind of king is Jesus Christ? Today's readings teach us that Jesus is a king of love, a king of peace, a king who witnesses to the truth of God no matter the cost to himself. Today we worship Christ the King who gloriously reigns in heaven. Our church year has ended. Next Sunday we begin to prepare for Christmas, our yearly celebration of the birth of the One born to be King, born on earth not in a royal palace but in a stable at an inn where there was no room for the Holy Family. Jesus, Emmanuel, "God with us."

God with us. Three words that capture the essence of Christ our King. God with us in the infant born in Bethlehem. God with us as a man, a teacher and healer, full of compassion and mercy. God with us in his suffering – of betrayal, mockery, pain, and death upon the cross. God with us in his resurrection from the dead, appearing to the men and women who loved him to assure them that he was alive. God with us now in our lives on earth, with us when we gather in his name, with us in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist. And God with us for eternity.

Christ the King, Emmanuel, has called us all to be citizens of God's kingdom of love. He has called us all to be priests who offer to God the sacrifice God desires – lives full of self-giving love, full of faith in God, and full of hope for the final coming of God's kingdom.

In this coming week, as we anticipate the season of Advent, we might ask ourselves what we can do to make our faith in Christ's "kingship" more visible, more active and effective, especially for the most vulnerable of God's children. In John's Gospel (17:14-16) Jesus speaks to his disciples just before he is betrayed by Judas into the hands of the soldiers who arrested him. He explains that though they are living in the world, they are not to be of the world, just as he was not of the world. This means that those who love and follow Jesus are to live by different values than the values of the world, by the values Jesus taught and lived.

Living in our culture as we do, we are aggressively tempted by the world to "celebrate" the Christmas season by spending and by consuming the goods of the world. How might we turn away from the kingdom of this world and instead serve God's kingdom as we prepare to celebrate Christmas? I would encourage all of us to keep in mind the effect on the environment of what we choose to buy and consume. I would encourage all of us to imagine how we might best use our resources to help people in need. The tremendous troubles of this world call us to love others, as a friend of mine put it, to love others fiercely. With strength of purpose, with faith in God's kingdom, as priests offering sacrifices for the good of God's good world and God's beloved children. This is the way to true joy. In Jesus' name. Amen.