

## **Christ the King – Year B (Nov. 26, 2006)**

Often on this Feast of Christ the King the preacher begins by telling the congregation how difficult it is for us to get excited about kings or to have any meaningful concept of them in our lives. But I'm not so sure that's true. Even though we haven't had a king in these parts since 1776, and kings have not figured prominently in our political experience, there is still an extraordinary fascination with royalty. Just consider all the attention we pay to the British royal family. Think of the Princess Diana and the current film *The Queen* about Queen Elizabeth II.

Be that as it may or may not be, to call Christ King is part of our faith language, so we have to try to deal with the concept.

The Jesus of the Gospels is not much help here. He never really claims or admits to kingship. At one point earlier in John's Gospel he actually flees the crowds who want to make him their king. Why? Because as he tells Pilate in the scene we just heard, if he is a king, his kingdom is not of this world.

Indeed this scene between Jesus and Pilate is fraught with irony and ambiguity, favorite devices of John the Evangelist. Here is Pilate, a minor functionary in a back-water province of the Roman empire, claiming the power of life and death over Jesus, who in his divinity, is author and sovereign, king if you will, of life and death. Here is Jesus, Son of God, King of Kings, standing in humiliation before Pilate, cynical and fearful for his own position of power and authority.

Well, just what does all this mean and what are we to make of it for ourselves? After all the Gospels must speak to us today. They must present the marvelous works of God to us today in our own lives and actions.

Where to begin? The most logical place is the place where Jesus himself learned about kingship in the tradition of ancient Israel. There is a very telling passage in the Second Book of Samuel when the people come to David and say to him, "Here we are, we are bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh. We are your people. Be our shepherd king. We place ourselves in your hands to care for us as a shepherd cares for his flock. We are your own flesh and blood." In David's time the king was responsible for his

people. If anything was wrong, it was up to him to set it right. That's why his sin with Bathsheba was not just a crime against her and her husband, whom he had killed, but a sin against all the people who had put their trust in him.

Well, David repented of his sin and went on to become the greatest king the Jewish people ever knew. He became a figure of the Messiah. When the Messiah comes, the people thought, he will be a king like David.

Well, David was the king of the Jews – and when the Roman authorities crucified Jesus they put a sign on the cross saying that this was the King of the Jews. They wrote that obviously in derision and mockery. They had no idea what it meant for Jesus to be king. Perhaps the one who comes closest to it is the thief who is dying beside him and who says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Now this man knows that his time on earth is fast coming to a close and the same is true for Jesus. So somehow he intuits that there is more to reality than what he has experienced. Somehow he knows that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, but it is real all the same. In desperation at the moment of death he calls out to Jesus, "Help me." And Jesus in his own weakest moment, when he feels the fragility of his and our humanity, as he is dying, says, "This day you will be with me in paradise."

This tells us a great deal about what it means for Jesus to be king. When they hung him on that cross, Luke tells us that his first words were, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." Now, his dying words to the thief are also words of forgiveness. This is the kind of king that Jesus is, a forgiving king. That's what he came to do and in a very real sense that's why he died on the cross: to let us know that our God is a forgiving God, who loves us very, very much, a God who so loved the world that he gave his only son for the life of the world.

The first two readings from Daniel and from the Book of Revelation add a further dimension to the notion of Christ as king. Revelation calls him the first born from the dead and ruler of the kings of earth. He is the King of Kings. But then both Daniel and Revelation repeat some of the apocalyptic language we heard last week and talk of him coming on the clouds. Jesus now is not only the forgiving king. He is also the cosmic king. Paul in his Letter to the Colossians will say, "In him everything in heaven

and on earth was created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or powers . . . all were created through him, all were created for him. . . . It is he who is head of the body. . . . It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him, and by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, everything, I say, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross.” It’s the cosmic Christ, Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

Let me tell you for a couple of minutes now just what the whole idea of Christ as king means to me. Maybe you might find some of the same meaning in your life.

First of all, remember that what we do here we do in the context of this Eucharistic celebration. In this Eucharist we will receive the Body and Blood of Jesus and by the natural processes by which we assimilate all food, the Body and Blood of Jesus will become our body and blood. We become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, and like those people in David’s time, we can come to him and say, “We are yours. Be our king and let us be your people.” Belonging to the Lord as his people and sharing his own flesh and blood means that in some way we are extensions of his own person. Our allegiance to Jesus our king means that we must be like him. We must be able to do the things that he did. At the heart of his ministry was reconciliation, forgiveness. Compassion was not secondary in Christ’s life. It was the way he exercised kingship.

Today’s world has so many examples of cruelty, harshness, the desire for vengeance, to exact an eye for an eye. We cannot turn on our televisions or open our paper without seeing scenes and reading stories of terrorism, death and destruction. I am forced to ask myself, in the light of these considerations, and remembering that Jesus had said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice,” recalling that Jesus in the very moment of his dying wants to bring pardon and hope, how am I to react? What does Christ, my king, ask me to do?

Then there is Christ, the cosmic king. We think all too little of the sacredness of the world and its redemption. But there is a sacred stamp on every part of creation, on snow-capped mountains, on gushing rivers, on every majestic oak. What are the consequences of this? Certainly one of them is that environmental concerns are more than political issues. They

should really spring from faith. There are those who argue that we are already well on our way to the destruction of the planet. Not just our faith, but even common sense tells us that the tide has to be reversed if our sinfulness is not to deprive our children and their children of their planetary inheritance. Christ, the cosmic king, must give us pause. And once again I must ask myself, "Where am I in all this?" What do you ask yourself? What does the Feast of Christ the King mean for us today?