

Sermon for the Sunday of Christ the King

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas
November 25, 2018

Today is the Sunday of Christ the King, but what does it mean in a democracy like ours to call Christ our king? Would we Americans be more comfortable with "Christ the Term-Limited Executive, Checked and Balanced by Two Other Branches of Government?" I wonder.

David Brooks wrote about a group of people who would have hated the title "king" for their Savior. The Puritan founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 were only too happy to turn their backs on the King of England, and all that he represented. What they hated was the way kingship stands for stability – tomorrow in the reign of the king will be the same as yesterday and today. That's fine, unless you don't like the way things were yesterday and think God wants them to be different tomorrow. That was exactly what made the Puritans want to live on a separate continent from their king.

So, freshly disembarked from their trans-Atlantic voyage, they faced west with their backs to the King's "yesterday" as their eyes searched for a different "tomorrow" that would bring in God's future. Brooks writes: "They saw flocks of geese so big that it took them thirty minutes to all take flight and forests that seemed to stretch to infinity. They came to two conclusions: that God's plans for humanity could be completed here, and that they could get really rich in the process." The Puritans concluded God's will was that tomorrow be a lot better than today, and the day after that and the day after that, and if some people fell off the turnip truck, well, so much the worse for them. That only meant they weren't predestined to glory.

So, *Christ* the King wasn't really in their playbook, especially the way Hebrews describes the reign of Jesus – the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Replacing the static savior were passions like Manifest Destiny, the belief that the Puritans and their successors were meant by God to fill the continent and subdue it. As time passed, whether people cast their vision as religious or social, spiritual or material, the term "American Dream" came to mean something transcendent. We're not just getting rich in America. We're proving out the inner meaning of the universe that says free, capitalistic, democratically organized people will make the world better and better as year succeeds year. We share the vision of the Puritans: that a vision worthy of God can be accomplished here and that we can get rich in the process.

There's only one problem.

By any measure of wealth, power, progress or history, we have arrived. The continent is subdued. We are the single colossus superpower sitting astride the planet; even in hard times, our economy is the one that defines other people's realities. By any measure of wealth, power, progress or history, we have arrived, *yet we are not happy or secure*. Please forgive me if I don't bother to prove that or describe it more fully. Just look around.

One would think that fulfilling God's purposes would make us happy and secure, so there's a fly in the ointment if we're not. The crux of the problem goes back all the way to the Puritans themselves. When they jettisoned the controlling image of king and stability, the Puritans turned human progress into the measure for judging the success of God's plan for salvation. Think about that: *human progress* as the measure of God's success? If you want to know how well God's kingdom is doing, just check out how well the Americans are doing? Are you kidding me?

That's a heavy burden to bear. Whenever we fail, we're not only letting ourselves down, we're giving God a black eye. No wonder anxiety is our national affliction. No wonder we buy a lot of guns. No wonder we drive our children to excel in ways that are bad for their health, their family life and their spiritual maturity. We've bitten off more than we can chew.

What to do? Well, we could do a lot worse than reclaim the notion of Christ the King. Maybe the height of wisdom would be to return humbly to a world where the fate of progress toward salvation doesn't hinge on our success today and our plans for tomorrow. If God holds the kingly power of salvation, maybe we can relax a little and let yesterday, today and tomorrow just be what they are.

What would it look like to give the king's crown back to Christ?

At the trial of Jesus, we find a single statement that stands the whole Puritan world on its head. It redefines kingship in a way that solves every problem with a single stroke, if we can only understand it and accept it. Pontius Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king as people claim. Jesus tells him yes, that he is a king, but he's not a king of anything around here.

Jesus' kingdom is not of this earth. *Jesus* kingship is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, but that does not mean that *things on earth* are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, or that God's reputation requires that we must improve things as our yesterdays give way to today and tomorrow. In fact, it means exactly the opposite. *Things* are not *Jesus*. Things and Jesus track differently. Things may be better tomorrow, or worse, or the same. In the divine scheme of things, *it doesn't matter*. The stability Jesus generates is in eternity.

What, then, is the substance of Jesus' kingdom where salvation lies? What exactly is it that is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow where Jesus is king? We get the answer in that glimpse of the Kingdom of God at the end of Matthew's gospel.

How well did you treat the least of these my children, Jesus asks each of us? Did *you* extend yourself to the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the forgotten? Did *you* extend hospitality to the foreigner? No matter your personal opinions, were you faithful to bonds of affection with angry conservative Episcopalians or self-congratulatory progressive Episcopalians, whichever you disagree with the most? Did you give credence to the victims of rape and sexual abuse? Did you forgive? Did you love your enemies and pray for them? Did you give your shirt as well as your coat? Suddenly, the people we wanted to abandon only yesterday become the key to our salvation today and tomorrow.

Through such compassion, Jesus levels things out among people. Jesus takes us to the place where we see clearly that it is not material ups and downs that define us, but rather the quality of spirituality in our souls that reveal who we are. The citizens of Jesus' kingdom discover the ties of compassion that make us one, beyond the ups and downs of this world.

And compassion means far more than being generous with our stuff. Compassion means actually entering into the mind and heart of others, walking in their moccasins, being in communion, so that you can fully grasp the reason for a higher, godlike standard of human relationship. Compassion is not about defeating others but embracing them. Therefore compassion, not victory, is what matters here and now and in the Kingdom of God.

For compassion is simply the way human beings are designed and equipped by God to live. The degree of our compassion is the degree to which we have entered into life itself. Compassion is the way of health, and vitality, community and prosperity. Compassion, openness to one another, is the way the saints and angels live in heaven.

Compassion is so very different from the mechanisms that generate wealth and power on earth. To base our spiritual measure in life on success is not the way of spiritual health. We can never achieve enough. We can never be good enough. We can never be safe enough. No victory is ever great enough.

But we can, all of us, be generous enough, love enough and be compassionate enough. We know when we are. Our hearts tell us because the return on compassion is health and peace, not fear and anxiety.

I don't think I'm telling you anything you don't already know. Compassion is not anything new to Americans. Maybe we're not as good at it as we are at conquering continents or figuring out ways to fly into space, but compassion has always been part of our national identity. One of the truly noble movements of our nation was Abolitionism in the 19th century. Though our ancestors treated Native Americans terribly, nevertheless there has always been a deep appreciation and gratitude in our culture for everything they are and have been; heck, even *John Wayne* admired Indians. *Per capita* American charitable giving is the highest on the planet. Second isn't close. We do know a thing or two about compassion.

We just need to re-order our priorities. Compassion and not empire-building is the way to fulfill God's dream for us because through compassion we enter into the life God had in mind when God created humanity and saw that we were good.

What is true for the nation is true for every individual in it. God is not asking you to prove anything at all in your life. Your parents, your teachers, your bosses and customers may demand that you prove something, but not God. God simply invites you into the life created for you in a moment of divinity.

That's the country where Christ reigns as king. Will you come and live in it?

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