

November 20, 2022
Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King, Year C
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Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

One of the regular users of our church facility is the Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus. The Chorus was founded in 1986, only eight years after the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, the world's first gay men's chorus. For most of its 36-year history, the Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus has rehearsed in our gym. In the beginning, hosting them was a bold and brave thing for this church to do. I'm told that, early on, as a safety precaution, people who contacted the Chorus to audition were vetted before being told the location. Things have changed, sort of. I'm pointing to the shooting that occurred last night in Colorado. Still, even today, the Chorus is a safe haven for some of its members.

The Chorus's main fundraiser is its monthly gay bingo, a.k.a. BingoMania! Who all here has ever been to BingoMania!? Each month the Chorus splits the take with another local nonprofit; the recipient of that half changes each month. You may be wondering what makes bingo gay, and I suppose the main thing is that it's hosted by a drag queen. Like all drag performance, gay bingo tends to the risqué and devolves to the raunchy. Therefore, while I can unconditionally recommend that you attend a Chorus performance, I can only conditionally recommend that you attend BingoMania! The next date is Saturday, December 17, and the theme will be "Bad Elves." I'll let you imagine what that's likely to look like. There will no doubt be lots of naughty mixed in with the nice.

My first exposure to gay bingo was when I lived in Seattle in the 1990s. There and then it was a fundraiser for a group called—wait for it—the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are drag queen nuns. To imagine a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence, cross a contestant on *Ru Paul's Drag Race* with a traditional nun's habit. The Sisters no longer host gay bingo in Seattle, but they still have chapters—"houses"—there and around the country. The nearest houses are in Brooklyn and Boston. The national website of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence describes the group's mission this way:

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are a leading-edge Order of queer and trans nuns. We believe all people have a right to express their unique joy and beauty. Since our first appearance in San Francisco on Easter Sunday, 1979, the Sisters have devoted ourselves to community service, ministry and outreach to those on the edges, and to promoting human rights, respect for diversity and spiritual enlightenment. We use humor and irreverent wit to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain the human spirit.¹

I wish there was a chapter nearby. I was recently thinking of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and reached three conclusions: one, every order of nuns needs a bishop; two, drag *queen* nuns should have a drag *king* bishop; and three, it would be awfully fun to give it a whirl myself.

I mean, look at me, right? The truth is, while I could probably manage the costume, I probably couldn't pull off the biting yet targeted humor. At its very best, drag is potent satire. Cultural constructions around gender are often deeply embedded and unconsciously expressed. Drag helps us all to unpack all that. It begins with gender but doesn't stop there. It goes on to lampoon and challenge cultural assumptions. Imagine what a drag king bishop might say about the church and all that it has wrought.

On the church calendar, today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, the last Sunday before Advent, the last Sunday of the church year. The Church of England's *Common Worship* book, the more-contemporary supplement to its *Book of Common Prayer*, says this:

The annual cycle of the Church's year now ends with the Feast of Christ the King. The year that begins with the hope of the coming Messiah ends with the proclamation of his universal sovereignty. The ascension of Christ has revealed him to be Lord of earth and heaven, and final judgement is one of his proper kingly purposes. The Feast of Christ the King returns us to the Advent theme of judgement, with which the cycle once more begins.²

I'm not sure about all that. All that judgment might not be particularly helpful as we try to get our heads around Christ the King. Maybe it helps to remember that Christ the King is a relatively new observance. Pope Pius XI added it to the Roman Catholic calendar in 1925. He did so in response to growing secular nationalism, particularly the rise of the Italian fascist Benito Mussolini. Other churches followed along over time.

Christ the King is, then, represents resistance to secular ideas of power and authority. In Biblical times, the king was the ultimate power and authority. But we live in a representative democracy. If Christ the King doesn't work for us, maybe we should try Christ the President. Or maybe not. I think calling Christ President only highlights the ridiculousness of the enterprise. We can never force Jesus—we can never force God—into constructions of our own devising. God just doesn't fit into those clothes.

My wife Jakki and I both attended seminary at Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California, though not at the same time. While she was the student, I was already a priest, and I served on the seminary staff, working on a project for the national church. The point is, because I was twice a part of the seminary community, I worshipped in the seminary chapel several times a week for six years.

There is one stained-glass window in that chapel. It's tall and narrow. It's very colorful and ornate. Jesus is standing. He's up at the top, kind of floating in the air. He's hovering over two disciples, one on either side; their heads are at about his shin level. They're looking up at Jesus, but Jesus is looking directly out at the viewer. He's wearing a robe like this one, over which is a stole like this one, over which is a chasuble like this one. In all that, he's dressed, well, a lot like me. But he's also wearing a crown and holding an orb and scepter. That window is, of course, a depiction of Jesus as Christ the King.

Lately, when I think of crown, orb, and scepter, I see those of Queen Elizabeth II, which were carried atop of her coffin during her state funeral in September. That association only amplifies my personal difficulties with the depiction of Christ as King. But I have long found that troublesome. At some point during out time in Berkeley, I started calling that window “Christ in Drag.” At the time, I was poking fun at it. But now, I can see that I maybe I was on to something.

Christ in Drag is the Jesus of the gospels, but clothed in robe and crown, and carrying orb and scepter. Jesus is something of a trickster, so I think might be up for it—though maybe just for Halloween. Just imagine what Jesus would say if he came here dressed in that get-up. Really, imagine what he would say. I think Christ in Drag would mock the entire concept of Christ the King. In the process, he would mock all our assumptions about power and authority. And he would mock all our conceptions of governance, and perhaps especially our attempts to apply them to the governance of his redeemed and reconciled world.

Some Christians yearn for a kingly and judgmental Christ to initiate a kingdom of their imagination to which they see themselves as heirs. I don’t recognize that kingdom or its princes, which include Christian nationalists, pandering politicians, and those who are generally mongering in hate. Christ in Drag would gleefully mock them all. And he would let them mock him right back.

In today’s gospel reading from Luke, Jesus is on the cross. One “criminal” mocks Jesus, but the other defends him, saying, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Note that the criminal says *kingdom*, but Jesus says *paradise*. We’re selling our Jesus short if we expect anything less. A paradise doesn’t need monarchy. A paradise doesn’t even need democracy or capitalism, even though I like those things. A paradise just needs love.

In this reading Jesus is not in drag, but you might say that he’s queering everything society tells us about power and authority. This past year, we’ve been reading primarily from the Gospel of Luke. Starting next Sunday and for the next year, we’ll rotate over to Matthew. But for now, remember that the overarching theme of the Gospel of Luke is that great overturning most eloquently voiced by Mary in the Magnificat. It seems fair to say that among those being thrown down are not just kings but also presidents and oligarchs and some late-stage capitalists. And if honest, and we bring it a little closer to home, we’re forced to admit that we’re wrong about what we think we know about, oh, for example, success, but perhaps also so much else.

That’s probably just as well. The first thing Jesus needs to do is to save us from ourselves. I say, give Christ in Drag that scepter, and let him use it create a whirlwind. I suppose this would leave us asking a lot of questions. Fortunately, we don’t have to have answers. Really, it’s kind of a relief, isn’t it? All we have to do is follow Jesus. Feed the poor, care for the marginalized. Use the systems we have to do that, and if they don’t work, then change the systems. Do it all, knowing that our King, our Christ in Drag, is not only coming, he’s right here with us.

Notes

¹ From the Home page of the website of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, available at <https://www.thesisters.org/home> (accessed November 20, 2022).

² From *Common Worship* of the Church of England, available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons/all> (accessed November 20, 2022).