

November 24, 2019
The Last Sunday after Pentecost—Christ the King—Proper 28
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Jeremiah 23:1-6
Canticle 16
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

Today's Gospel reading is a big leap from last week: last week Jesus was teaching the disciples, and this week, rather jarringly, he's hanging on the cross. It may feel like Good Friday, but in fact today is the last Sunday before Advent, the last Sunday of the church year, the Sunday we recognize as "Christ the King." For me, that particular name for Jesus always feels a little bit uncomfortable. I may watch *The Crown* on Netflix, but I'm not particularly enthralled by the British monarchy. For me, talk of kings and queens infers things like triumphalism and subjugation. Admittedly, Christian history includes triumphalism and subjugation, but that is not how I like to think of Christianity. Besides, if our reading is about Jesus on the cross, maybe the point is a different way to understand kingship.

Yes, there are other lenses through which to gaze upon Christ the King. This past September I preached about Jesus as trickster. That was related to economics and the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. On Christ the King Sunday, maybe it's helpful to look at Jesus as the court jester. In that scenario, he has crown, scepter, and orb only because he has *stolen* them. And he puts them on in order to reveal the truth: they're nothing but a costume. Underneath the purple velvet and white ermine, the king or queen is just like everyone else. Most specifically, they are just as naked and vulnerable as everyone else. Crown, scepter, and orb are ultimately worthless; the *real* fool is the monarch who believes otherwise.

The current troubles in our world today arise less from monarchs and more from oligarchs. If Christ the King has crown, scepter, and orb, Christ the Oligarch might wear Armani suit, Italian loafers, and Rolex watch. But the idea is the same. Foolish or not, the mugged king or queen—or oligarch—must deny or resist that naked truth to maintain their vulnerable facade. Heeding the whispers of the evil one, they elevate self by degrading others, creating a hierarchy of human value that is antithetical to everything we know about God's intent for humankind.

Of course, *every* human being is naked. For this reason, every human being is vulnerable to the damaging effects of what those above them in the hierarchy have wrought. It also makes every human being vulnerable to the lures that would lead them to engage in similar behavior. In relative terms, this is temptation to which we are subject. Our individual actions may take place on a smaller stage, but the impulse and impact are much the same. One person's portion might be incrementally small, but a population's effects are cumulative. For example, despite everything I know, I still consume too much, and I consume the wrong things. I'm the lab rat who keeps pulling the lever, because I feel better when I do. Maybe you've heard the term *emotional contagion*. It's the idea that emotions spread through a group—that our feelings affect and are affected by others. I wonder if we as a society are currently living through an epidemic of emotional contagion, an epidemic with the momentum of the plague. Maybe it's worse than the plague, because the plague doesn't spread at the speed of light. We should cut ourselves some slack, even as we edge toward a new way of doing things.

And so, maybe, on *this* Christ the King Sunday, Jesus-the-Trickster has arrived just in time. I imagine him laughing and skipping away from the throne, tossing his gem-encrusted gold accessories as he goes, beckoning us to follow along. He's leading us to a kingdom that is like no other. God has clearly demonstrated what it takes to get there. It's not Christian conversion, that triumphalism of a different sort. Rather, it's love, just love. This kind of love is cultivated by accepting and honoring one's own naked vulnerability, because that's what it takes to accept and honor the naked vulnerability of everyone else. It's not easy; most of us will find it to be a lifelong challenge. But as Jesus on the cross attests, nakedly vulnerable love carries a power beyond our understanding; with God's reconciling grace, we join Jesus in coming into the kingdom. With that in mind, Christ the King, the Prince of Peace, is a sign of hope.

I am a huge introvert who finds much in solitude. But I have to admit, it is in the company of others that I find hope. Breaking the synapses of emotional contagion requires not disengagement, but rather a better kind of reengagement. I'm taking a bit of a turn here because last week's celebration of new ministry remains on my mind. One of the characteristics of a gathering like that is that it creates what you might call a "pop-up congregation"—it assembles folks who wouldn't normally be together. Our pop-up congregation was for me a great source of hope. It was a reminder of what we are about, and a sign of what is possible. I'm grateful to all who attended.

Our preacher was Paul Carling of the Episcopal Church at Yale. We've been friends for twenty years, since we met as lay people at our mutual home congregation, St. Paul's Cathedral in Burlington, Vermont. Observing that our period of "trying on" is over, he said this:

Tonight we celebrate that Keri and the people of St. Thomas have said 'Yes' – to growing together as a faith community, a church family. Having tried on this relationship, like an old married couple, you have worn down each other's rough spots, accepted each other's limitations and strengths, built up each other's gifts, and decided to walk the way of love, the shared leadership of God's people in this place. You've made a sacred commitment to abide with each other, to grow together in love.¹

Besides folks from the Parish and the Day School, it was a joy and a privilege to have a number of visiting clergy in attendance. They are among my closest colleagues and dearest friends here in Connecticut, and I came to know them through our work together. For example, among the visiting Episcopal clergy were those from New Haven and Hamden, and also some from around the diocese whom I came to know through work on care for creation and racial justice. Because the diversity is instructive, I'd like to mention by name the interfaith or ecumenical clergy who were present: Herb Brockman, who though now retired remains active as Rabbi Emeritus at Congregation Mishkan Israel; Jack Davidson, Senior Pastor of Spring Glen Congregational; Tim Keyl, Pastor of Bethesda Lutheran; Jordan Lenaghan, Roman Catholic Dominican priest, Executive Director of the Office of Religious Life at Quinnipiac, and Chaplain of the Dominican Mission at Albertus Magnus; and Orlando Yarborough II, Pastor of the Black Church at Yale.

I thought about the roster of clergy who attended, adding the clergy who reached out to offer their regrets, and I realized how much it says about how I understand my own call to ministry, and how I have responded to that call. But remember, the clergy may have shown up because they know *me*, but they were here for *us*. Here at St. Thomas's, we are still finding our own new ways of "doing church." I believe that, looking around, both within and beyond this congregation, we find friends who become colleagues, and colleagues who become friends. Such relationships yield deep personal satisfaction, and they help bring the change that God wills for the world.

This Thanksgiving, I hope you join me in gratitude, for this community of faith, for its members, and for the friends and colleagues whose love helps us on the way of love.

Notes

¹ Paul Carling, in his sermon preached on November 20, 2019.