

Sermon – Feast of Christ the King

Matthew 25: 31-46

Today marks the last Sunday of our liturgical year and also the Feast of Christ the King. The Feast day of Christ as King was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI as a reminder to Christians that their allegiance was to the spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly supremacy.

Pius XI was like many citizens of Europe of that time, profoundly influenced by the devastation of the First World War. He called Jesus the Prince of Peace, as only under Jesus' reign he said could true peace ever exist. Further he said, "For Jesus Christ reigns over the minds of individuals by His teachings, in their hearts by His love, in each one's life by living according to His law and the imitating of His example."

We can imagine that surviving the terror of WWI would have left deep psychological and spiritual scars. Many probably wondered why the Prince of Peace had not stopped the war. WWI and WWII revealed to the world that the manipulation of power by leaders, and the resulting concurrence of their citizens, led to devastating destruction. Millions of lives were lost, whole countries almost all destroyed and the winners punished the losers by imposing harsh reparations.

Without giving a history lesson here, we know that the rise of the Kaiser, Adolf Hitler and others who manipulated their citizens, was to primarily benefit their own lust for power. They believed that they had been divinely selected to carry out their desires. Many other countries have also experienced dictators and other so-called 'divine leaders' and have paid the price for following them, or indeed opposing them.

The seeds of human destruction lie with these morally corrupted leaders, and these seeds have been planted time and again by people who believed they are called by God, or some higher power to carry out God's divine purpose. We even see the same thing being played out today here in this country. The so-called QANON conspiracy has at its root the belief that President Trump has been divinely selected to lead the fight to dismantle what they see as a global network of pedophiles operating at the highest levels of government and society.

When ordinary people believe that someone has been divinely selected to overcome a perceived evil, it can be hard for them to discern the truth. We are susceptible, especially those without a moral touchstone, to being manipulated by those with power and evil intent. As far as I can tell the president has not disavowed the stated purpose of QANON and some of those that believe and pedal this conspiracy have now been elected to Congress.

The phenomenon of so-called divine rulers is certainly not new. You might recall the story from the first Book of Samuel, Chapter 8, where the people of Israel became convinced that the judges that God had established in the land were not enough for them. Knowing God was supreme over all things was also not enough. They wanted a king like other nations. They

believed that Samuel's sons were not following in their father's ways and so they wanted someone else, a king.

Samuel warned the people that an earthly king would not be good for them as they would manipulate them and enslave them for the king's own benefit. But they insisted on having a king, just like other nations. And so God granted them their wish, and Saul was selected as the first King.

God warned them that when things turned bad for them, which was predicted, God would not free them from their predicament. They would be left to manage the situation on their own. Kings down through the ages have been raised up as potential saviors for their people. Battles have been fought by warrior kings, leading their armies to take land and peoples into their possession. Many kings held their power only by their benevolence to those that posed them the greatest threat. Once they lost this support they were often deposed, most of the time violently.

Jesus, though, was a king like no other. He wasn't a warrior king that lead his people from horseback, like the great Roman emperors of his day. Nor was he a king of old that lived in a glamorous palace, handing out decrees and dispensing wisdom from his jeweled and ivory throne. Jesus was a different king. He was the king of peace and offered people a new version of kingship, a version where the king was a servant, humble, merciful, loving, forgiving, healing and encouraging.

Jesus was not always referred to as a king, nor was he treated like a king during his life. He was only referred to as King at the beginning and end of his life. First it was the magi, who travelled a great distance from the east to visit this new king, pay homage and bring him gifts. He wasn't born in a palace but rather a dank stable, the most humblest of births. But they recognized him as king and honored him as such. Herod, the earthly king of the time, was jealous and scared of this new baby so he killed all the infant boys to try and eliminate the threat.

The only other people to call Jesus king was Pilate, when Jesus was being tried for sedition and then the Roman soldiers that mocked him yelling, "Hail, King of the Jews," before they spat on him and beat him. Finally, the chief priests, scribes and elders called him, "the King of Israel," and said to him as he suffered that they would only believe in him if he came down from the cross.

In the days before the Passover, Jesus had been teaching his disciples with a series of parables that we have read and reflected upon these past few weeks. Today's gospel reading is the last lesson Jesus taught before he was anointed and then betrayed. Jesus had wanted to be sure that his disciples fully understood what was going to happen and the work that they needed to do after his death to perpetuate his reign in the kingdom on earth.

This final teaching foresaw Jesus as the Son of Man, coming to earth in all majesty, with all his angels to sit on the "throne of his glory." A king looking out over his subjects gathered as the

nations of the earth before him. At that time there was to be the great separation of people, or more precisely of nations, groups of people. Before the separation there was to be a test for which the people were subject.

The test was to understand if people have been merciful to their neighbors or not. Had the people fed the hungry when they encountered them, had they offered a drink to the thirsty, had they welcomed them even though they didn't know them, had they clothed those without clothes, had they taken care of the sick and visited those left in prison.

The lesson teaches us that Jesus presented himself to everyone in the form of the poor and the needy. The people who were merciful didn't recall meeting Jesus and feeding him and clothing him, welcoming him or caring for him. Jesus was as he says, aligned with those that were vulnerable and outcasts. It was these people who were "members of [his] family."

The other group was a group more self-centered than other-centered. They ignored the poor and the vulnerable, not offering them food or drink, not clothing them where they were naked, nor caring for them when they were sick or in prison. This group failed to see that each of the poor they encountered, and turned away, had within them the spirit of God, members of Christ's family.

Jesus was born to be a righteous king, but a king that was wholly different from the earthly kings, who were both heralded by the powerful and at the same time despised by the poor. Jesus was a king of mercy and the poor were, and still are, members of his family.

As followers of Jesus Christ, subjects of the King of Peace, we are called to rise above the earthy temptations of power and subjugation, and live our lives having mercy upon those we see in need. This requires of us a posture of openness to the movement of the spirit of God in our lives and in the lives of those in need. Sometimes it is us who are poor in spirit and God works to care for us by showing us true mercy, in the love of another person.

Today is a reminder that Jesus is indeed the Prince of Peace and it is to him that we owe our allegiance. Jesus Christ reigns over us as a loving father, teaching us his ways, showing us His example of living, and filling our hearts with His love, so that we might be his body in the world about us.

May God bless you this day and fill your hearts with His love and may you be Thankful that Jesus came into the world as our king, our Prince of Peace.

Amen.