

Last Sunday after Pentecost – Christ the King Sunday

2 Samuel 23:1-7, Psalm 132, John 18:33-37

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I was surprised on Monday night when one of our Bible study members told us that Christ the King Sunday was only established back in 1925. Pope Pious XI felt the Christian world needed to focus on the person of Christ as our only king and savior after national leaders had fought a bitter war to establish world domination. That didn't stop another world war, however, and today we still face nations and rulers wanting to dictate how others should live.

According to Paul Harvey, hundreds of years ago, an infant nation, having just won its independence from a distant empire, asked a certain man to be their first king. The man resolutely said, "No!" The rest of the story, as Paul Harvey enjoyed telling his audience, was that the young nation was the former 13 British colonies in North America, and the man was George Washington.

Most of what we know about royalty comes today from England where the queen and her family are beloved but not powerful or from stories and movies about powerful, but mostly corrupt kings of centuries past.

Jesus as a king, therefore, is a bit of a paradox, especially as we examine the gospel stories we know about him. Even though an angel tells Mary that her son will be given the throne of his ancestor King David, and magi follow a star to look for a king born to the Jewish people, Jesus' birthplace is a cattle shed, and even as an adult he has nowhere to lay his head.

On Palm Sunday Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey to cheers of "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," only later that same week to be arrested, whipped, stripped naked and elevated on a cross of suffering and death.

The one time in the gospels we are told the people tried to make Jesus their king, he deliberately slipped away to a lonely place to pray.

Jesus' answer to Pilate in today's gospel is consistent with his understanding of the type of power he wished to exercise throughout his life. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world." While Pilate would have been confused by this answer, Jesus is in effect reassuring the Roman governor that he doesn't have anything to worry about from him. Jesus is not competing with Rome for control, wealth, land or military superiority. The proof is that no one fights to have Jesus released from captivity.

Pilate understands little else than nationalism and right by might. Earthly kingdoms and how you win them and maintain them are all Pilate knows. What other kingdoms are there?

From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus said the Kingdom of God was at hand. Part of the truth that Jesus was born for and came to testify to was that there was an alternative to kingdoms ruled by faulty human beings.

That kingdom is without any means of enforcement.

That kingdom is without wealth or property.

That kingdom is without boundaries and walls.

In that kingdom, all are welcomed, especially the chronically unwelcomed.

In that kingdom, the king serves his subjects whom he calls brothers, sisters and friends.

In that kingdom, the king gives everything he has away.

In that kingdom, the king is available to everyone.

In that kingdom, the king's life is dispensable because God reigns.

In that kingdom, there is one rule – Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

In that kingdom, people show their allegiance to the king by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving the thirsty drink, visiting prisoners and welcoming the stranger.

The kingdom of God is not so much a place at all. It is more of a way of life, a way of living in and yet above and beyond our smaller earthly kingdoms. While we are inhabitants of the earth, we are also citizens of heaven.

Once upon a time, there was a king who didn't have a son and heir to his throne. He posted official notices throughout his realm that he was looking for a boy or young man to adopt as his son. The only requirement was that the individual have both love for God and for his fellow human beings.

A poor peasant boy saw the notice, but feared he would never be selected because his clothes were so ragged. He worked day and night to earn enough money for a new outfit and then started off for the long journey to the king's palace.

Not far from the walls of the royal city, he passed a man poorer than he was. The man was ill clad and shivering from the cold. He couldn't pass him by without doing something, so he gave the man his new clothes in exchange for his tattered garments.

Certain now that he would never be selected by the king, he decided to at least catch a glimpse of the palace from the outside since he had come so far. As he entered through the city walls he was greeted with sneering remarks and scornful laughter by the palace guards. An official of the king, having spotted him, nevertheless invited him in and escorted him before his majesty. Bowing low, ashamed of his own appearance, he was afraid to look at the king. Yet, when he

did take a quick glance up, he couldn't help but feel like he had seen the king somewhere before.

When the king left his throne and approached the boy, he was completely confused and disoriented. The king was wearing his new outfit, and beneath his crown he recognized the poor beggar's smiling face. The king warmly embraced the lad and whispered, "Welcome home, my son."

Christ the King Sunday brings to an end another church year. Jesus has been born from God through human parents and lived with us in humble, human form. He taught, healed and showed us the truth about who God is. He died to defeat our enemies of sin and death. Having done that for us, he was raised and finally exalted to the highest place in the Godhead as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Earthly rulers occupy seats of honor and live in luxurious palaces, while Christ the King's only desire is to be enthroned in our hearts. Jesus wants to be seated at the center of our lives, where he can tell us over and over again, "Welcome home, my daughter." And "Welcome home, my son." AMEN.